



An inscription in Konkani at the foot of one of the largest monolithic statues in the world. This statue of lord Gomateshwara was created around 983 AD by Chamundaraya, a minister of the Ganga King, Rajamalla.

Kaleidoscope

Konkani essays by

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***Dedicated to my dear grandson, Rajaram Girish Kelekar—
Tobu, who is no more with us***



Dedication

Tobu was my grandson. The ties that bind a grandfather and a grandson are even closer than those between a father and his offspring. We were more devoted to each other than the best of friends. How many dreams had I conjured up about his brilliant future, that too, while sitting by his side! This youngster will achieve something extraordinary I always thought, but suddenly, he went away. I'm eighty two years old and still around; is it fair that this youth of eighteen is snatched away when he is still on the brink of an exuberant life? That too, in an accident! His face appears before me, and my eyes, unable to control themselves, well up with tears so that I can't even see him clearly any more.

Like the hotheaded Rishi Durvasa I scream,

'This is not an accident! It's murder! The government is responsible for this second tragedy in our family – twenty two years ago my niece Karuna, nineteen years of age, was crushed to death beneath a truck. Death to all these leaders! Who knows how many innocent lives are lost because of these uncontrolled attempts to urbanise and industrialise Goa! Let these culprits die! May their sons and grandsons,

I begin to tremble is the force of my outburst registers in my mind and
ay to myself,

Enough! Stop being emotional. All these deaths will not bring Tobu back.
You must learn to seek him in the deepest recesses of your heart, keep him
shrined there ... and my soul, overcome with helplessness, seeks comfort in
hymn that used to be a part of our prayers at the ashram—

'Mangal Mandir kholo, Dayamay!' 'Throw open the doors of your
auspicious temple, O compassionate One!'

Lord, You are an ocean of love and compassion. My Tobu stands at your
door. He is a simple soul, untouched by deceit and the corruptive ways of this
world. Who knows why he felt that this life was like a dark, impenetrable forest.
I have been trudging through it for eighty two long years and I do not know where
I shall end. But this youth, at the tender age of eighteen has cut through the
darkness and stands at the threshold of light. We cannot even imagine how
rapidly he must have travelled to get to your door.

I do not know why you have taken him, you must have a reason for you are
not guided by mere whim or caprice. Everything that happens in your
world — all that is created or destroyed, all that is born or dies — everything
happens because of a greater plan. Nothing occurs in a capricious fashion.
You do not gamble with us as pawns in a game of dice. You do what is
necessary, for the greater good. Your creative energy is always directed
towards an auspicious end and you must have taken Tobu because you felt
it was necessary. For his own good.

He is an affectionate child, most worthy of your love, do not keep him
stranded outside. Throw open the doors of your auspicious temple and draw
him to your side, pat him affectionately on his back and say a few loving words
that will fill him with joy. He has rushed through this immense forest and is
overcome with thirst, see how he gazes at you craving a few drops of the
nectar of love. Draw him close to your heart and make him your own. Let him
drink his fill of the nectar of love. Keep him by your side. We took care of him for
a mere span of eighteen years. We hand him to you, now.

This hymn was composed by the Gujarati poet Narsimharao Bholanath,
who continued the prayer meetings that had been started by his father in
Ahmedabad. His eighteen year old son Nalinkant passed away suddenly,
just like Tobu did, and all the turmoil in the heart of this loving father was
poured into this hymn. This world runs according to an auspicious set of
rules, it says. What else could the distraught father do? He threw himself
at the feet of the Almighty.

'At the start of our prayers we hail you as 'Pita Nosi!' or 'Father of the
world!' You are Nalinkant's father, too. I have looked after him all these
years, I now turn him in to you. Open the doors to your auspicious

temple, Lord!’

This was the passionate plea of an emotional father.

Will this ‘Father of the world’ not gather my Tobu close to his hear? Will he not pass an affectionate hand across his back? Will he not let him drink his fill of the nectar of love? Will he not take care of Tobu?

His old grandfather is not such a blind rationalist that he can say ‘No’ to any of this.

With a heavy heart, I dedicate this book to his sweetest memories

— Ravindra Kelekar

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THE INSPIRATION TO WRITE

I am not a litterateur. I didn't aim to become a writer, didn't ever aim to become one. In fact, I didn't have a very good opinion about writers.

At that age when youngsters dream of doing meaningful work, of becoming important people, I had already been smitten by the desire to do social work. The social fabric especially in Goa, was totally inept and people had no clue about their identity. Such a society shouldn't be allowed to exist, it must be destroyed. I strongly believed that an upheaval of social forces was necessary and I had begun to air such views.

I must have been eighteen or twenty years old when I came into contact with the writings of Swami Vivekananda. It was as though the mighty Himalayas had been wrenched from their site and flung to some other corner, so great was the tumult that was unleashed in my mind. Swami Vivekananda scooped me up from the path that other people travelled and set me down on another road. Soon I bumped into Marx, who gave me an intellectual framework to channelise my exuberant thoughts and feelings and I began to think of myself as a Marxist.

It was around this time that I came under the influence of Dr. Ram

Manohar Lohia, who was a hero to the youth of my generation. We followed this heroic and fearless intellectual and before I knew it my Marxist leanings were completely wiped out. It was he who told us about Gandhi, about the importance of his revolutionary ways and I must admit that I began to look at Gandhi with favour from that time.

Dr Lohia withdrew from Goan politics and we, who had thrown ourselves into the freedom struggle, were suddenly left to fend for ourselves. A number of groups came into existence and as I struggled to find my feet I found myself in Wardha. I was young, and not very impressed by the concept of non-violence but my faith in violence (armed revolution) had been swept away by what I had experienced. Let's see if Gandhi really has something to offer, I thought. When I experienced there was like a flash of lightning cutting through a dark night momentarily illuminating a whole new world before my eyes. I wanted to share all that I saw and heard, read and experienced at Wardha, with my companions. I couldn't keep these experiences to myself, so I began to write about them. I started the Konkani fortnightly, *Meerg*. My literary instincts awakened. I wrote, and much to my surprise, the writer within me raised his head.

They say that a villager, who has spent years gossiping and conversing with everyone around him, makes a good 'gaonkar' or village elder, drawing on all these experiences to administer the village. I feel that it is these years of regular writing that have turned me into a literature. Literature has never been the aim of my life. It is a by-product, something created incidentally.

I have no idea about the position of planets in my horoscope, but one thing is certain. I have had the good fortune to be surrounded by books right from my childhood. There were two cupboards full of books in our house. My father gave them to me as a gift on the occasion of my thirteenth birthday ceremony. When I lived in Wardha I was able to dip into Kakasaheb's magnificent library. I have taken up a job only once in my whole life, that too, as a librarian at the Gandhi Memorial Museum in Delhi.

I have always enjoyed the company of books, and through them I have been inducted into the company of great people. As I read Vivekananda, Zweig, Dostoevsky and Gorky I realised that books could take me into the company of great people, no matter how far back in time or how far away they lived, and this conviction has only grown stronger over the years. Even today when I spend my time in the company of such people, I am never alone. Even in a village like Priol I live in the company of Buddha and Gandhi, Tolstoy and Rabindranath and a host of others who belong to different places and times. I don't mind going without food for a couple of days, but if I were forced to give up their company I would be very unhappy indeed. The very essence of my life would have evaporated, so essential is their presence in my life.

I have never looked at books as mere objects. Within them I have encountered worthy individuals, who have become my companions and friends. I might have hesitated to buy a *lungi* or any article of daily use

because of financial constraints, but when faced with the prospect of buying a worthy book, who knows how, but money has never been a constraint. It is these individuals who have awakened the literature in me, it is their company that has nourished my creativity.

As I immersed myself in the best of world literature, the activist within me, that part of my persona that wanted to transform society, was suddenly faced with a question – why was there no such writing in my language? Why did no literature exist in my mother tongue? Was the language too weak to support creative writing? But how could the tongue used by a robust, traditional society be weak? Was the landscape barren then? Was there no spark of creativity in my people? No, I couldn't agree with that. Shikhab Borkar had established himself as a Marathi poet long before I had begun to read, and Lakshmanrao Sardesai had earned renown as a writer of short stories in Marathi. I was aware of the fulsome praise heaped on Menezes Braganza for his writing in Portuguese and Adeodato Barneto's name was on every young person's lips. Armando Menezes had achieved fame writing in English while Manjeshwar Govind Pai made a mark writing in Kannada. If all these people had set their hearts on it wouldn't there be a flourishing literature in my language too? But all these individuals, and many who went before them, chose to write in languages other than Konkani. Why was this so?

As I thought about this, I could find only one answer – there were no ties to bind my people to their language. This, too, would have to change, I thought. At that point of time I had not heard of Shennoi Goembab, I didn't know that he had expressed similar thoughts. It was only after my awakening that Shennoi Goembab's writing fell into my hands. I enshrined him in the deepest recesses of my heart and swore that I would guard the flame that this man had kindled, and keep it burning as long as I lived.

When I look back today I realise that it was the activist within me, the rebel who wanted to transform society, that goaded me to take steps to change this plight. 'It's immaterial whether you can write well or not. It's your duty to write to the best of your ability, and thus attempt to fill up this lacuna', he would prod. Even today, when I read a worthy book in any language, that voice whispers in my ear, 'Such a book should be written in Konkani, too, don't you think?' And if the subject is something I am familiar with, he often goads me into writing it as well.

I have never felt the need for anyone's encouragement when I write, in fact I can't remember anyone encouraging me, either. I know that my writing is of no use to anyone, that no one will come forward to publish it. Yet, I continue to write, often working for ten or twelve hours at a stretch, so that the activist within me is satisfied. He does not let me sit back and rest. 'Write. Never mind if it doesn't get published. It is your duty to

write and duty can never be evaluated in practical terms.' And then he whispers softly in my ear, 'Has any good, worthwhile deed ever gone

unnoticed till today? This, too, will not.'

It is said that fools rush in where angels fear to tread. Going by that principle I must confess that I have dabbled in many different forms of writing, but the genre that appeals to me most is the essay.

I have had many bitter-sweet experiences in this journey called *feeling* and they have given rise to so many questions, the answers to which I have been seeking all along. I have sat at the feet of some of the greatest thinkers in modern times, evaluating my thoughts and responses in the light of their teachings. I have sought answers to those questions and immersed myself in evaluating those answers throughout my life. As a result, I have never had to look out for topics to write about. I find my subjects in the world about me. Like the poet who says that poetry 'comes' to him, I must confess that the essay 'comes' to me, bringing with it a distinct form and mood, unfolding its various facets before me, compelling me to write.

Some novelists declare that the characters in their novels often take on a life of their own, compelling the author to write their stories. I didn't believe this at first. But experience has taught me that even ideas can do the same, they can take control of the narrative in such a way that the author is merely the medium who writes them down. What I have to do is to take care of the style. It must be simple, so simple in fact that it doesn't get noticed at all. If the reader's attention is drawn to how something is said rather than to what is being said, I believe that the essay has failed.

I do not know what my essays have given the reader, but I have gained immensely from them. Vague ideas that I instinctively believed in have been scrutinised and polished and given an acceptable form. Concepts that were confusing have been explained. These essays have helped form my character and given me a new perspective of life. It is said that a writer shapes literature but I don't think that is correct. It is his writing that shapes a writer's character and makes him grow.

Some time ago I started a new exercise. I began to compress ideas that I used to expound in eight to ten sheets of paper into a single page in my diary. I have realised that this form suits my writing, in fact I feel that short stories should also be written in this form.

A travelogue is a form of essay too, I feel it is the best way of expressing one's thoughts and feelings. After writing descriptive essays on the Himalayas, Japan, Gharapuri, Varanasi and Jog I have begun to feel that my style is outdated, that a new form of travel writing must be evolved. I have travelled all over the country and seen so many wonderful things, but all this must be written in a new style. That style continues to elude me, so that writing must wait.

I didn't aim to be a lit

ple who wrote. I wanted to change society, and I joined politics with aim. It was the activist within me, the one who wanted social upheaval, that awakened the writer in me, and soon these two entities fused into

Today the writer within me is in absolute control, driving me along. A years ago he spurred me into translating the *Mahabharata* into Konkani, compelling me to write nine hundred pages. He has started nudging me to write a biography of Gandhi, draw a picture of the whole Gandhi era in to seven volumes, or maybe eight to ten volumes each comprising five hundred pages or so. It may take you five to ten years, but start this work at e. Sometimes he says - you don't visit temples or spend time in religious als. Your concerns are more basic and primary. You have pondered over se questions of existence all your life. Compress the essence of all that you e seen and believed in into a single volume.

Who knows whether I will succeed in doing all that he wants me to. It will e at least fifteen or twenty years for all that and who can tell if I have so many rs left? As each year comes to a close I become desperate, drawing away n my surroundings physically and mentally. All I want to do is to immerse elf in literature and writing. And then I sit and work for ten hours, often ve hours in a day. Till I am overcome by exhaustion.

WHY DO I WRITE?

Why do I write? What do I get from writing?

Let me see what others have to say about this, I thought, before I formulate an answer.

I came to Mumbai and met a Marathi writer. 'Tell me, why do you write?' I asked, expecting a worthy reply that would give me some extraordinary insight. But what he said gave me an unexpected jolt. 'You want to know why I write? For money, of course!'

I was deeply enraged, almost ashamed to be in his company. He could have said something like 'I write because I must', so many singers claim to sing because of such a compulsion. But he says he writes because he is paid to do so, maybe he does, how can I doubt his motive, I didn't say any more. But it set me thinking, suppose someone told him that he would be paid twice the amount he got for writing if he didn't write another word. Would the man stop writing, then? I didn't think so. Writers should get money for their work. But people continue to write even if they have no hope of earning anything from their efforts. So some other motivating factor must be there, but what was it? The need for fame? Perhaps.

All our actions are governed by the need to make a name for ourselves or to maintain the fame and recognition we have already achieved. Our name should be on everyone's lips; people should point to us and say 'There! That's him. That's the one!' All other cravings can be satisfied but the desire to make a name for oneself, the need to be recognised only grows stronger day by day. Man will go to any lengths to prove that he is better than those around him, he might even take recourse to unfair means. Buddha says that a man who makes a name for himself by unfair means spends the rest of his life singing his own praises and heaping ridicule on others. All of us have encountered 'famous' people such as these, yet we hanker after fame.

It is easy to dash off something and get it published, so people with no literary talents have also taken this route to being noticed. Publishers, these days, seem so desperate, that they will publish anything but often this leads to ridicule rather than fame. If editors and publishers refused to publish anything that did not merit publication, many of our writers would have been spared embarrassment and published works would have been around for a longer period of time. But principled publishers, like politicians, are hard to find today.

Like everyone else, I, too, was very concerned about my name and reputation, till suddenly, one day I realised that it didn't matter at all. It happened like this -

I was standing at the bus stop in Mardol one morning, waiting for a bus to Panaji. Two or three buses passed by, each packed to capacity. Finally I decided that I would squeeze into the next bus, come what may. Five minutes later another one arrived, it was very crowded and people hung out of the door. I pushed my way in and looked around hoping that someone would get up and offer me a seat. More than half the passengers were acquaintances, people who lived in Antruz, yet not one person offered me a seat.

By the time we got to Banastar a strange thought was swirling in my mind. I am quite well known in Goa; people know me as one who works for the Konkani language, as a writer, as an intellectual (as though that sets me apart), and even as one opposed to Marathi and things Maharashtrian. But all this renown couldn't get me a simple thing like a seat in a crowded bus. What use was this name and fame? Was it worth anything at all?

By the time we got to Old Goa the 'glamour' associated with fame had vanished once and for all.

I learnt another lesson that day. I always carry a good book in the bag slung from my shoulder, the one I had with me that day was Pascal's '*Pensées*'. '*Pensées*' means 'thought' or 'idea' and this was a wonderful collection of thoughts, big and small that make one ponder deeply about them. As I sat down for lunch in a hotel I opened this book and my eyes were drawn to a statement, 'How many Kingdoms know us not!'

It was as though someone had suddenly knocked me on the head, how futile this was! There must be around two hundred countries in this world, in how many of those was I known? Let's forget the world and come to India, my country. How many people in the different states have heard my name? Since I have been closely associated with the Sarvodaya movement as well as with the Sahitya Akademi, a few Gandhians and a handful of Indian writers might know me. But if I were to count their numbers the figure would not go beyond fifty, or seventy five at the most. The only people who've heard of me are Goans, it's only amongst them that I can lay any claim to fame. So, how many people might know me in Goa? Ten thousand? In a state with a population of ten lakh? When my wife got married I sent invitations to all my friends and acquaintances in Goa and outside -- and the list didn't even touch the one thousand mark!

The entire arena of my experience, my whole world, is therefore, very small. In such a limited scenario a few trophies and honours can lead a man to believe that he is greater than those about him. But how great is he, really? He's only a midget, of no significance at all, the answer wells up from the depth of my heart. Whatever misconceptions I had about my fame and fame vanished at once.

I didn't want to achieve fame as a mere writer. At an age when youngsters strive to 'become' great I was already enamoured by heroes like Jawaharlal and Subhas babu and all Indian writers seemed insignificant before them. I believed that all cultured Indians should be patriotic, willing to fight and to go to prison in order to make their country free. Jawaharlal and Subhas babu were writers too, they wrote very well, but their writing was a by-product, not their main mission in life. Hence, I looked upon mere writers with contempt, they seemed like jesters, putting on an act which I found disgusting.

I look upon writers in the same way even today. I am closely associated with many writers, not just Goans, but also those from other states. I am closely associated with many famous writers and I have a deep regard for much of their work. Yet I feel that the servants who do menial work in our homes lead more productive lives. They are like pots brimming with water; I must state that I haven't found any such worthy characters amongst the people who claim to be 'mere writers'.

Though I hold such a poor opinion about 'mere writers' I have joined their ranks, and all I do these days, is write. Why do I do this? One, because of the urge to create something new. And two, because of a sense of duty or commitment that spurs me on.

It is now sixty six years since I was born and I have seen and experienced much in all this time. Innumerable questions have arisen in my mind. I have read widely and formed certain opinions, which, when pondered over in the light of the experiences gathered over the years, seem fresh and new. And then, like the gossip monger, whose tongue itches to share some

newly acquired gossip with someone else, the urge to create something new overpowers me and I write.

Whatever be the opinion I have about writers, I must state that I have an abiding passion for the literature that they create. Literature has taught me things I had no clue about. It has rendered what was dim and hazy into well defined concepts, offered me support and wisdom and enriched my soul. Some of my dearest friends and associates are no longer alive, others have drifted away because of the quirks of my personality, but my association with literature remains unchanged. People from distant lands have been brought close to me and many of them have become associates and dear friends. They give me company. They give me courage and support, and I am never alone.

I have always regretted the fact that such great literature does not exist in my mother tongue, till just the other day there was no literature at all. After thirty or forty years of struggle and hard work we can produce some amount of writing in the language, but there is nothing that can be called truly great. Not a single book written in the language can be termed 'inspirational' or worthy of being read again and again. But such a book will be written some day. It is my duty to ensure that the foundation of my language becomes strong, the literary output does not flag. A new style of prose must be developed keeping in mind the innate rhythm of the language. Whatever I have that is positive and good must be offered to my mother tongue so that the gaps and lacunae in the language can be remedied.

Why do I write? To remove the shortcomings in my language. To strengthen the foundations of my mother tongue. And what do I gain from this exercise? A sense of fulfillment. Immense satisfaction.

I have no desire for anything more than this. Nothing inspires me more.

3

WHAT IS ORIGINAL, AND WHAT HAS BEEN BORROWED

How do I determine what part of my writing is original and what has been borrowed from others? We absorb ideas and influences from other people. I have done so, too. But when these factors appear in one's writing should they be treated as the writer's ideas, or should they be regarded as borrowed stuff?

Maybe that depends on the manner in which the material is 'borrowed.'

The Sahitya Akademi honoured Venkatesh Madgulkar with an award for one of his books. Now, Madgulkar is a renowned short story writer in Marathi and if any of his work published after *Bangarvadi* had been honoured in this manner, no one would have had cause to object. But the book that the Akademi chose to honour was not his work at all. He had adapted someone's English novel, given it a Maharashtrian setting and passed it off as his own. The Akademi received innumerable letters of protest from Maharashtra and the Executive Board had to spend more than two hours to sort this matter out.

Yishram Bedekar's novel *Ranangan* created a furore on the Marathi literary scene some years ago. This was an unusual work and Bedekar came to be known as a writer who was quite apart from the others at that time. Today, it is said that the novel was 'lifted' from other sources.

The term 'plagiarism' is used to describe such borrowings or theft of ideas and material from other sources and the attempt to pass it off as one's own. Many literary greats, whether they be N.S. Phadke or P.L. Deshpande, have got away with this because the common man does not see flaws in the famous people who are his heroes. I have never indulged in such a crime.

Yet one is sure to find ideas borrowed from other sources in my writing and the influence of many people is very clear. Does that mean that my work is not my own, it is 'lifted' from somewhere else?

Vinoba countered such an allegation in a very appropriate manner when he said, 'My body draws sustenance from all that I eat and drink, and that includes rice and wheat and grains, fruits and vegetables, milk and so much else. All this gets digested and absorbed and forms the blood in my veins. Now how can I tell you which drop of blood was formed from wheat and which one was formed from milk? It's the same with ideas. I have been associated with so many people, drawn so many ideas and beliefs from diverse sources and used these inputs to nourish my intellect. How can I pinpoint what I have gained from which source? All this is now mine, I am offering it as my work and it should be accepted as that.'

Vinoba drew a lot of ideas from diverse sources, but he was most influenced by the teachings of Shankaracharya, Gyaneshwar and Gandhi. Yet he had his own identity and it is important that we accept his thoughts and pronouncements as being his own.

I cannot enumerate the number of people who have had an influence on me, there must be over a thousand names. I have taken ideas from many sources but I have pondered over them, absorbed what I thought fit into my system and it is only that which I truly believe in that appears in my speech and writing, and therefore must be accepted as my work and not someone else's.

We are influenced by what we see, hear and read but we do not accept all the influences that come our way. We accept only that which seems suitable to us. What is the criterion that we use in this case?

Gandhi was so deeply influenced by Ruskin's *Unto This Last* that from the very next day he modified his lifestyle and began to live according to the principles laid down in the book. There is a very important sentence in his autobiography, where he writes about how deeply he was influenced by the book - 'I found a reflection of my deepest, most profound thoughts in this book.'

The ideas in the book were already dormant in Gandhi's psyche, all Ruskin did was to awaken them. What was hazy and still unformed became clear when he read the book. Now tell me, who deserves credit for the change that the book wrought in Gandhi's life? Ruskin had written other books and Gandhi had read them, but none of them made an impact on him. Many other people have read *Unto This Last* but no one has been

transformed by the book like Gandhi was. So if one has to give credit for Gandhi's transformation, only ten percent should go to Ruskin, I feel, ninety percent should fall to Gandhi's lot.

So, what this means is, we do not absorb everything that we see or hear or read. Certain thoughts or ideas that we cannot fully express might be lying dormant within us. When such an idea is clearly and lucidly expressed by someone else we cannot help but exclaim, 'Exactly! Just what I had in mind, but I couldn't put it into words!' When an external stimulus kindles what has been lying dormant within us so that it is awakened and clearly expressed, the expression must be accepted as being a personal statement, original and individualistic, not something borrowed from elsewhere.

One who inspires and awakens the latent qualities and energy lying dormant within us was termed a 'Guru' by our elders. Dattatreya was said to have twenty four gurus.† must be having twenty four thousand of them, and I've spent my whole life being inspired by them. I believe that if there is something worth emulating in someone, be it a child or a mad man, one should acquire those qualities at once, and I have been doing so always.

But once I borrow an idea I test it in the light of my experience, I ponder over it and mould it afresh and only if it seems worthwhile do I accept it as a part of my life. Only then does it find expression in my conversation or in my writing.

There are a few books that are worth stacking up by one's pillow, which can be dipped into just before one drifts off to sleep. One such 'bedside book' is Lin Yutang's *The Importance of Living*. Open any page at random and you will be sure to find some statement that keeps coming back to you again and again. Lin Yutang has said nothing new in this book. It is an amplification of what his predecessors have said, how the ancient Chinese savants looked at life. Yutang is unique because he condenses all this wisdom into contemporary language and expresses it in his own words.

'There is nothing new in all this,' he writes, 'there is nothing new in this world. You might have encountered these thoughts in the works of other intellectuals. But I present them as my own thoughts because they have become an integral part of my personality. Their roots go deep down into my psyche. They express something original in me, and when I first encountered them, my heart gave an instinctive assent.'

This, then, is the way it is. When someone is convinced that he has something important to say and therefore expresses his thoughts with ardour and conviction; when he is unable to withhold this expression and elaborates on the idea in diverse ways, steadfast in his belief that he will be understood by those before him; at such times his very language becomes forceful and convincing and it is evident that what he says is original and born out of his own belief.

It doesn't take long to distinguish between what is borrowed and what is fake.

A WRITER AND THE EXERCISE OF HIS CRAFT

I have never had to work hard at writing. To write something, then feel it is not up to the mark; tear it up and start all over again, this has never been part of my experience. Any incident might trigger thoughts and ideas I set them churning in my mind. This process continues till the thoughts are formulated into a pattern and seem ready to emerge, only then do I pick up my pen and write them down as they appear.

Writing, to me, has been as normal and easy a process as drawing breath. I'd been writing for quite some time, when I suddenly felt that this process of putting down my thoughts in such a random fashion, was not correct. A singer nurtures his voice, practises his craft and only after years of dedication is he ready to perform. Writing, too, is an art that must be nurtured and cultivated. These skills have to be practised with single-minded devotion, I realised. Ever since, I have pondered deeply about the ideas and thoughts that gushed forth, I have pruned and polished them till I have been completely satisfied, and only then have I let them be published.

This entire process—craftsmanship, if it can be called that—begins in the recesses of my mind long before I sit down to write. It continues as I

write and sometimes continues after I have finished a particular piece. If my writing is to be published as a book I have often revised the material again, sometimes these alterations have been done on the final proofs.

Writing is an art. Like all arts it calls for immense dedication and single-minded pursuit of one's craft.

Much of my writing deals with ideas that I have pondered over for a number of years. Every idea can be viewed from at least two points of view and I take great care to acquaint myself with what has been written by experts in the field. I have been lucky to enjoy the company of great minds that have thought deeply about life and have had the good fortune to exchange views with them. Besides, whenever I sit to write on a subject I try to obtain the latest and best information that is available before I pick up my pen.

Thus, in recent times, I have always pondered over ideas, tested them in my mind, pruned and polished them till they are clear and easy to understand before putting them down on paper. I gather as much information as I can about whatever topic I am going to write about, and my reading, too, is largely confined to that material. That phase of my life, when I read widely merely to satisfy my curiosity and when I dashed off articles whenever ideas hit me, has long since vanished.

Writing is an art, and like all other arts it is fragile and must be nurtured with dedication. It was around the time I realised this truth that I started to be careful about my style as well. I have never been drawn to an ornate style of writing, it reminds me of an anaemic young woman, who has used excessive lipstick and powder and rouge to appear presentable. A writer's style should be like a healthy young girl, beautiful without any artificial embellishments. Someone told me (or did I read this, somewhere) about the English writer Dryden's writing, 'Prose has never been written in England like that before; it has seldom been written like that since.' So I realised Dryden - pulsing with life, multi-coloured, like the breeze that wafts past - this was a style that filled me with joy. I decided to acquaint myself with different styles of writing, but I have never had the time to do this. By the time I was free of the responsibilities of public life I had already written a great deal.

Nevertheless, I always took care to ensure that what I wrote was clear and unambiguous; that I fully understood whatever it was that I was trying to say, and that I was able to express it as easily as if I were sitting on a verandah having a conversation with friends. I have never been too concerned with making my style beautiful or attractive. It should be clear and simple and should sound pleasant to the ear. It was only much later that I consciously began to keep my sentences short and crisp.

I do not belong to that group of writers who start thinking about a topic only after they sit down to write. I think about the subject extensively and prepare a format in my mind, only then do I begin to write. Sometimes I am struck by new thoughts and ideas which I incorporate into my work. This is a normal part of the creative process, I feel.

If the writer is not clear about his subject, his readers will have to read a piece twice or thrice to make sense. No writer should commit such an offence. Having to read a piece twice or thrice just to make sense of it does not necessarily mean that the article is weighty and serious. The incomprehension might just be the result of the writer's obscure style. When I read Bertrand Russell's work I realised that the most difficult ideas could be expressed in simple words. Russell's work is entirely philosophical, yet his writing can be read and understood by ordinary people. I came across the work of Schopenhauer much later. I realised, yet again, that a clear, simple style is far more attractive than an ornate, highly embellished one.

A simple, lucid style has to be nurtured with care, just like one nurtures the various facets in one's personality that mark us out as cultured human beings. An enlightened consciousness, etiquette, restraint - all these are the marks of a cultured personality and these should be evident in the writer's style. A cultured person is not fickle or impetuous, nor is he heedlessly grave. He is pleasant and contented, and takes care to keep freedom at bay. He is not frantic and excitable, so he does not evoke such emotions in the reader, either.

It is said that Voltaire's work represents the best prose written in Europe and I had Gandhi, Kaka Saheb Kalelkar and Vinoba as models. Each man's personality was imprinted on his style: the language was stark, you couldn't move words or shuffle words about in their work. Cultured and forthright, each man's style of writing provided an insight into his personality and his inner strength. Gandhi's writing is worthy of study as a remarkable example of English prose. All three writers were fully aware of what they wanted to convey, hence their writing is infused with vigour and the strength of conviction.

I have come to two conclusions: 1) Poets, who are always preoccupied with the cadence and rhythm of words cannot write good prose.

2) Good orators are not necessarily good writers, they tend to lose themselves in rhetoric.

Both these styles are attractive, almost musical in fact, but the reader is often unable to grasp what the writer has to say. A preoccupation with the rhythm and cadence of words, and the tendency to lapse into rhetoric are the two major factors that make prose difficult to understand. Words have an innate cadence which is transferred into the sentences one writes. But words also have a form and structure, which is equally important. Thus, the tonal quality of the words we use, the form and structure of the sentences and the weight of meaning emerging from those words are factors that a writer must pay attention to.

I have been writing for forty years now, and my style has developed with time, yet, despite these years of practice I can spot many flaws in the way I write. I cannot incorporate Konkani proverbs into my writing. Those who do not make use of proverbs and sayings have no right to write, but what can I do? I have not had the time to study these facets of the language and

to incorporate them into my style. All I have done is to try and ensure that my writing is not too dull or dry.

I do not know what I will do if my old books are set for publication yet again. I shall not have the courage to present them in their original state, I would like to revise them. But if I revised my old work it will not be 'old' any longer, it will become a fresh, new piece of writing and will need a new title.

So, I have framed a few rules for myself. Whatever I write is first published in some journal or magazine. If it is deemed worthy of being published as a book, I run a critical eye over the material and make necessary changes. This process continues as I scrutinise the press copy and then the final proofs. Only then, do I leave the book to its fate.

'If one of your old books were to be reprinted today wouldn't you be tempted to revise your work?' I'd asked Shivram Karanth, once.

What he said, was this - 'A father tries to instil good sense and values in his son till the boy comes of age. Once his son grows up and becomes a member of society he should be left to his fate. The father should not try to mould him any longer. Books, too, survive or perish according to their fate.'

Like the village elder who spends a lifetime gossiping with his cronies and then draws on all that experience to manage village affairs, a man who spends his whole life dashing off pieces for publication, finally gets to be known as a writer. It is only after writing for many years that an author is able to write a good book. His first book might not be very notable. As he continues writing he commits mistakes, and as he rectifies those mistakes he learns from them. There is no better way for a man to discover his identity. Once he does this he strives to express his deepest thoughts and feelings. In other words, he 'arrives.' Someone once said, 'A good work is a result of long apprenticeship and at the cost of a good many failures.' We can say the same about a writer's style.

Words have a cadence about them as well as a certain structure and form. They must be organised into sentences in such a way that they sound good to the ear and appear pleasing to the eye that scans the printed page. Good prose should resemble the conversation of a well bred man. It should not bore the reader or seem shallow. But it should also avoid undue seriousness that might make it incomprehensible to the ordinary reader. I am still very far away from achieving this ideal state, but my efforts continue.

Gandhi's prose was clear and simple, infused with humility yet strong and forceful at the same time. His sentences seemed attractive in print, because his ears were attuned to the cadence of the spoken word.

The writing process no longer appears to me as simple and easy as the process of drawing breath.

ONLY FOR INSPIRATION

I was writing a paper on some subject and needed some additional information so I drew out a pile of books from the cupboard and sifted through them, but the details I sought eluded me. I was disappointed. What could I do now? Whom could I approach? Suddenly I sprang up, elated. I had a set of Dr. Girdhar Vyankatesh Ketkar's encyclopedia, surely it contained everything one could possibly want. And here I had been, rushing about the neighbourhood in consternation, when the infant I sought was cradled in my arms all the while! What was wrong with me, why had I wasted so much time and got so upset?

I drew out the encyclopedia from the cupboard and found the information I was seeking, but O God! This was stale information, almost a hundred years old! I tossed the book on the table and spluttered to myself, 'If people rely on such information they'll remain ignorant. No wonder large parts of Maharashtrian intellectuals are steeped in ignorance What a worthless volume this is ... should be tossed out!'

I lit my pipe and sprawled on an armchair in disgust, when suddenly, the shadowy figure of an elderly man appeared before my eyes. He seemed hesitant and nervous, 'Will the job I have come here for, be accomplished?

Or shall I have to return, disappointed?' he seemed to say.

I must have been seven or eight years old at that time. We were living in Diu, it was afternoon and my father had his lunch and was asleep. There was a strict rule in the house that no one could make a noise when Baba was having his afternoon siesta, so our mother would gather all the children about her on the front verandah, and even if the cat made a noise she was sure to be reprimanded. We, children, felt as though we were in prison. Sometimes, someone would come up to the door asking if Doctor saheb was in. It would seem as though a bomb had shattered the silence and we'd rush up to him and whisper, 'Don't make a noise! Baba is asleep!'

We were sitting on guard that day when this short, old man walked up to the door. His clothes were crumpled, there was a bundle resting on his shoulder and he carried a bag in his hand. 'Does Dr. Kelekar stay here?' he asked in Marathi.

We were quite surprised to see this man and hear this strange language but before we could rush up to warn him, Baba woke up and opened the door.

'Are you Dr. Kelekar?'

'Yes.'

'I'm Dr. Sridhar Venkatesh Ketkar ...' the man said, staring at Baba with a piteous expression on his face.

I still remember the expression on his face, as though he was wondering what sort of reception he would get ... would he be ticked off for intruding into the house? The man's face with its worried, nervous expression still seems fresh before my eyes.

And Baba? For a moment he didn't seem to know whether he was awake or in the midst of a dream, and then he was suddenly so excited and ecstatic ... he didn't know what to say or do ...

All this seemed to appear, again, before my eyes.

After the encyclopedia was ready Dr. Sridhar Venkatesh Ketkar travelled all over Maharashtra trying to sell those volumes. He trudged from door to door in different parts of the state, and then he travelled outside Maharashtra, to Indore, Gwalior, Baroda and now he had arrived at Junagadh. In those days one of Vaman Malhar Joshi's brothers, I forget his name now, was an important government official in Junagadh. Dr. Ketkar got him to buy a set of his encyclopedias. He also heard that a certain Dr. Kelekar, a Goan who read Marathi and had a passion for buying books, lived on the island of Diu, a Portuguese principality only thirty or forty miles away.

Dr. Ketkar decided that he would try to sell another set of encyclopedias. He undertook that arduous journey of forty miles in a horse carriage, braving the blazing sun and arrived in Diu, looking for Dr. Kelekar!

I stared at that volume of the encyclopedia, lying on my desk. What were the sights I saw there ... and who were the persons featured there?

Jyanyaneshwar, Tukaram, Eknath, Namdev

Yes. The Marathi language gained prestige because of your efforts, I owe it to them. You took the wisdom that was locked up in Sanskrit, the language of the priestly class, and carried it straight into the hearts of the ordinary, ignorant masses. The people of Maharashtra became refined, they learnt to improve their lot, all because of your work. You are great!

But can one say that the Marathi language came into its own because of your efforts? If the immortal poetry composed in a language were the only criterion needed to mark the self-sufficient nature of that tongue, then Awadhi and Braj would also have qualified, for their poetic output is as good as yours. Tulsidas and Surdas are not inferior to you, they have made the people of their region more cultured, they have also improved their lot. Even today people read their books with faith and with joy. Yet Awadhi and Braj are regarded as mere dialects, they have not been granted the status of full-fledged languages; how can we say that Marathi acquired that status because of your efforts, then? You gave Marathi immortal poetry, you became immortal in the process, but I cannot give you the credit for keeping Marathi alive.

Who deserves the credit, then? A whole range of modern litterateurs - poets, short story writers, novelists, playwrights, essayists and journalists appeared before me, with N.S. Phadke in the very forefront. I was overawed. I said to the old man ...you are great, how can I deny that? You freed Marathi writing from its preoccupation with moral issues like the soul and divinity, heaven and hell, virtue and sin and brought it out into the modern world. But for you, Marathi would still be enmeshed in morality and religion, it would not have made people laugh or cry or enjoy themselves, it would not have cultured their souls. It would not have shown us the divinity lurking within ourselves, or the Satan who also resides in our breasts.

You have done so much for humanity, but ... may I ask you something, I won't get angry, will you? Did Marathi acquire its status as a well-endowed language after you came on to the scene? Or did you get to work in a language that was self-sufficient, anyway? How much service did you offer your mother tongue, how much of your blood and toil was involved? If you had not received royalties, if you had not acquired a wide readership, would you have continued to write in Marathi ...?

Suddenly a motley group of individuals appeared before me. Some had turbans wrapped about their heads, others wore caps; some looked eccentric and gauche and I didn't recognise most of this crowd. But right in the forefront stood Dr. Sridhar Vyankatesh Ketkar, in his white crumpled suit and brightly coloured neck tie. The bundle bearing the encyclopedia volumes was slung over his shoulder and there was an uncertain expression on his face - just as I had seen him in my childhood.

Yes! I exclaimed at once. You represent this faceless crowd, I do not know them, but I know you. Educated in Europe, you could have opted for

a job with a good salary and led a comfortable life in a big bungalow. But there was 'something' within you that made you turn away from what was routine and practical, and made you immerse yourself in what the world termed 'impractical and unnecessary'. Marathi had great poets like Dnyaneshwar, Tukaram, Eknath, Namdev and Ramdas. Prose writers like Chiplunkar, Tilak, Agarkar and Paranjpe had enriched the language with their work, but you said No! That's not enough. Where are the books that will provide information about diverse topics, where do we have something comparable to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in our mother tongue? We cannot consider Marathi to be a 'self-sufficient' language till such books are published. As long as Marathi speakers depend on other languages for information, their mother tongue will remain weak and inferior; it will never become the main language in use in their daily lives....

And so, you set about compiling an encyclopedia in Marathi, working in difficult conditions, often going without food or comfort, with no help or support from anyone. Each word in that encyclopedia is written in your blood; Marathi's status as a self-sufficient language was built by eccentrics like you who spent their whole lives toiling and doing penance for this cause. Dnyaneshwar and Tukaram laid the foundation, Tilak and Agarkar built on this base but it was you who raised the walls You gave Marathi an infrastructure.

I picked up the volume I had tossed so contemptuously on the desk, and touched it to my forehead, with reverence. Tomorrow, I could give away my whole estate, without a second thought. I could donate the books in my library. But I will treasure this set of encyclopedias that I inherited from my father as role model ... for the inspiration it provides.

INHERITORS OF THE LEGACY OF VALMIKI AND RABINDRANATH

What is the ideal role that a litterateur should play? Should he merely entertain the reader, making him laugh and cry as he comments on the ways of the world? Or should he be involved in uprooting all that is warped and rotten in society and in ushering in thoughts and practices that are sound and beneficial and will stand the test of time?

In the old days *Dharmacharyas* or religious preceptors helped in bringing about this change. They studied the scriptures and chose moral principles which they interpreted in the light of their own experience. They weeded out what was redundant and adapted the traditional to suit contemporary needs.

Adhering to tradition does not mean that one must stick to only that which has been inherited from the past, it also implies a sense of continuity or 'moving forward' in time. If one merely sticks to inherited principles and practices one is being orthodox, not traditional. Orthodoxy is rigid and inflexible, like a rock that impedes motion. Tradition, on the other hand, is fluid and carries society forward with its motion.

Dharmacharyas brought about social change by setting themselves up as examples, they practised the principles that they preached so that people

were inspired to follow them. Religious preceptors shaped people's likes and dislikes and enhanced their culture. They placed lofty ideals before them and pointed out the path to attain these ideals. What we consider the essence of a good life and the values that we cherish in society were first pointed out by these religious preceptors. Mighty emperors have been unable to bring about a change in society; social upheavals have always been created by religious preceptors.

Just as the crown prince succeeds his father, the emperor, to the throne, certain eminent disciples take over the power and authority wielded by the *Dharmacharya* after his death. In the first case, the crown prince is anointed by the emperor himself. In the second, there is often a struggle for power and the strongest disciple takes on the mantle of the preceptor. The disciple is able to emulate the actions of the preceptor but no disciple has managed to inspire and breathe life into the movement as his teacher managed to do. Hence, in most cases, after the teacher's death, the disciple concentrates on perpetuating rituals which border on orthodoxy and measures to bring about social change are often ignored.

None of the *Tripitakacharyas* who followed the Buddha in the last two thousand five hundred years have managed to inspire the people like the Master did. Christ still inspires people more than any of the heads of the various churches that have sprung up in His name over the last two thousand years. The achievements of the Adi Shankaracharya have not been paralleled by any of the Shankaracharyas who have inherited his legacy. The institutions built by these religious preceptors still remain, yet the status and credibility attached to them in the past have been eroded over the years.

In the years that followed various *sants* or seers took on the responsibility of creating social change. Most of these men had no formal education and came from humble backgrounds, yet the effect they created in society was more than that created by the *Dharmacharyas* in the past. These were farsighted men blessed with exceptional humility, so they didn't proclaim any desire to change society or keep it under their control. All their efforts were directed at building their own moral character, of purging their own imperfections and vices. In the process they inspired common people to emulate them, bringing about change and enforcing discipline in social attitudes.

Their biggest contribution was in the manner in which they brought moral discourse out of the clutches of the upper classes and made it an essential feature of every common man's home. The people in our villages may not have access to formal education, yet they are not uncultured — this is largely because of the efforts of these *sants*. Ramakrishna Paramahansa had no formal education, he couldn't even sign his name. Yet, he had the knowledge and moral strength to 'mould' a Vivekananda and present him to the world.

While religious preceptors and seers dismissed many of the principles handed down from the past as being 'irrelevant', they had a high regard for

erature. The *Dharmacharyas* composed religious texts and wrote analytic commentaries on various moral topics while the *sants* composed hymns, rich folk lore, praising the Lord. Literature, they both realised, was a potent instrument for bringing about social and cultural change, but while the texts written by the religious preceptors were aimed at scholars and intellectuals, the work of the *sants* found a place in the hearts of the common people. That which was written in an elite classical tongue remained confined to dusty bookshelves in libraries while the hymns written in the ordinary dialect reached the common people and continued to thrive. This is why a beautiful language like Sanskrit, which boasts of many excellent works is reduced to the status of a 'dead language' today, while *Prakrit*, the common man's tongue continues to grow and to thrive.

The *sants*, however, committed one mistake. They remained aloof from society and preached that the afterworld, that of Heaven and Hell was more important than the earthly one. The common people were not bothered with the afterworld, they merely venerated the *sants* and began to worship them, so the opportunity to bring about social change was frittered away. A new breed of holy men who were shallow and superficial in attitude, and a host of charismatic poets achieved prominence around this time. The common people soon realised how superficial these seers were, so they stopped flocking to them. And even as they chanted the *bhajans* composed by these charismatic poets they realised that it was the inner glow of the emancipated soul that was more important than mellifluous poetry, so they turned back to the humble verses composed by the *sants* of the past.

Creativity and charisma can make one a great poet but it cannot make one enlightened, the poets soon realised, so they said, 'We're not seers, we're litterateurs, we don't aim to change people's lives. We're ordinary people like the rest of you, don't expect anything exceptional from us. We compose poetry because it gives us satisfaction. If you like the verses you may chant them, if you don't they will remain confined to the anthologies we publish.'

These poets were frank and forthright but they failed to realise that the legacy of the mighty Valmiki rested on their shoulders. Valmiki wanted the spring of compassion to well out of the stony hearts of men, so he composed the *Ramayana*. He did not write a single line for his personal pleasure, nor did he write to entertain his readers. He didn't tailor his work to suit what his readers wanted, nor did he preach about the nature of life. What we must not forget is that the *Ramayana* has shaped this country and even today it has a great impact on our lives.

A litterateur must exercise his craft with the aim of shaping his country. We cannot say that he is not affected by any aspect of life. Rabindranath, one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century was a man of many facets. Poet, short story writer, novelist, playwright, essayist, and expert on grammar, he composed music and was an artist, too. He directed plays

and acted in them. He was a teacher, an educationist and social reformer whose strong voice was often heard in political circles and in the field of religious reform. He encouraged cottage industries and established a rupee Bank and didn't ever claim that he was only a poet who was uninterested in other aspects of life.

A litterateur should never forget that he has inherited the legacy of Valmiki and Rabindranath. It is only when he loses sight of this fact that he assumes the role of entertainer, and as he becomes one with the hero or the villain and the clown he demeans himself as well as the literature that he creates. Society should intervene in such a situation with a mild reprimand. 'Your job is not to entertain but to enrich our inner lives and establish noble social ideals. Religious preceptors and seers have toppled off the pedestals we built for them. If you demean yourself as well, who will save society from this moral crisis? Give us some ideals that will shake us out of the slumber and engage us in socially productive tasks, may your writing inspire us towards such an end. Let others entertain people. You are not a mere artist, you are a great master of art and literature, greater than a master of religion, teacher. You must not degrade yourself, you must be an ascetic in the pursuit of your mission. Society needs a litterateur who is an ascetic as well.'

WE ARE GREATER THAN DEATH

I must sleep for at least half an hour in the afternoon. I wake up refreshed and then I'm ready to work with as much energy as I worked in the morning. It's as though a new day has just begun. Yesterday was Sunday and there were many visitors so I could not take a nap. I was exhausted by evening and fell asleep at nine. As a result I woke up by half past four and though I wanted to read something I knew the light would disturb the others sleeping in the room, so I drew a chair into the courtyard and settled down to watch the sun rise.

Everything was still. A couple of insects chirped noisily and the layer of silence that had settled over the place, seemed to intensify. I drew deeply, trying to fill my being with this profound stillness. My eyes were drawn to the sky where Punarvasu, the seventh lunar mansion took the shape of a boat. I recognised Prakriti and Purush Brahma-hriday and Prabhas, Ashlesha and Kalki and so many familiar stars. I don't know when I dozed off but dawn had broken when I awoke and the ticking of the clock in the hall drew my attention— it seemed to be coming towards me. This is not a clock that is ticking, these are the footsteps of Death advancing towards me, I thought. How soon? But there's so much work that is incomplete, better finish everything

quickly, I thought as I got down to work.

I'm an ordinary man, like any other, I know that I shall die one day. one knows when Death will come, and every man, even the greatest among us must die, I know. Yet I continue to live as though Death will come for other people, not for me. I shall only accompany the corpse to the crematorium ground. Even at this advanced age I overlook the fact that Death is catching up with me, step by step.

So many companions have passed away, many of them were at the peak of their exuberance. I've lived alongside Death, yet I don't feel that I will die. It's one thing to accept the theory that Death is inevitable; it is quite another to see Death standing at one's door.

A great thinker, Rehana Tyabji, said to me one day, 'Brother, Death is inevitable, but don't just sit and wait for it to come. Settle all your accounts of life today as though Death has already arrived and is waiting at the door. Whatever you had set aside for tomorrow, do all that today. Whatever you had planned to do today, finish it right now. Only then shall you learn to live fully, not simply pass through life. The awareness of Death gives depth and meaning to life, and this is what counts. The number of years you live do not matter ...,' Rehana ben's words keep ringing in my ears.

I was supposed to be working but thoughts of Death filled my mind, and I refused to go away. Finally I said to myself, Death will come anyway, why shouldn't I embrace it now? At this very moment. What can it take from me? What worries? All right, I forsake these worries at this very moment, of my own free will. In any case these worries won't plague me after death. Nor will they remain behind after I am gone. They will cease to exist the minute my life is gone, why can't I forsake them now? This thought whirled about in my brain for a mere second or two but it was as though a huge weight was lowered. I felt light and liberated, as though I was swimming in a sea of joy.

I have voluntarily divested myself of many responsibilities over the last few years. I have drawn away physically and mentally from many activities and duties that enmeshed me in the past. I don't pay attention to many things, nor am I affected by much that happens around me. I have no expectations in life and this is a liberation of sorts. The goals that spurred me on as a youth have been attained, and I have contributed to their success. No one will complain or suffer any great loss if I don't work any more. If Death comes at this very moment there is little that it can snatch from me – a body, worn out with living, for which I have no great love.

I felt that I had earned a fleeting victory over Death.

Some people say that Man should take up an assignment that he can never complete in a lifetime, and work at it with single-minded purpose. So even though Death takes him away, it fails to touch what he has created for. Death can only hold sway in the world of Nature, not in the world created by Man's intellect. Man's body passes away from this world but the work I

What is left behind is immortal.

The work he leaves behind lives on in people's memory and inspires others. Great artists and sculptors, musicians and litterateurs have been taken down by Death, but it has failed to touch the art and music and literature that they have left behind. Death has carried away the Buddha, Socrates, Jesus Christ, Marx and Gandhi, but they continue to inspire millions. They have gained victory over Death.

A line from Rabindranath comes to mind.

No matter how great you are, you cannot be greater than Death.

I shall be greater than Death. Saying this, I shall take my leave'

MY FAVOURITE BOOK

Which is my favourite book? I can't say, offhand. Must think about it.

The first book I read was *Aesop's Fables*. I must have laid hands on some books ere that, but I can't remember if I read any of them. I read the *Hitopadesha*, *Panchatantra* and other such books after I read *Aesop* but none of these stole my heart as *Aesop* did.

If someone had asked me to name my favourite book at that time I would have without doubt, 'It's *Aesop's Fables*.' When I read these stories, even today, I am tempted to write reflective essays on each of these fables. No wonder this remains fresh and interesting after more than two thousand years!

Man's tastes and interests, however, do not remain the same, they continue to change with age. A book that he liked, at one point of time, may not appeal to him as much at a later stage as newer books take his fancy. I have dipped into books written in six languages. I don't think any multilingual reader can point to a book and declare that it is his favourite one. I cannot, I know.

If someone had asked me this question thirty years ago I might not have hesitated. I was an adolescent, and the first few hairs of my moustache could barely be seen. At that age one has an opinion on everything and one is convinced that

those opinions are correct. One is even ready to deny the existence of God.

Today, the hairs in my moustache are grey, and I know that there is a vast body of knowledge and experience that I have no idea about. I am not giving an opinion about any matter without adequate consideration. I know that matters, regarding which I have strong views, can be looked at from another angle, too. So how can I just declare that such and such book is the best one I have ever read?

When I began to read avidly, youngsters of my generation were divided into two camps - those who worshipped the Marathi writer V.S. Khandekar and those who preferred another Marathi writer, N.S. Phadke. There was much discussion in those days about whether Art should reflect reality or whether it should exist for its own sake. Khandekar's idealism touched my heart and left me shaken, but I was young, and Phadke's depiction of life drew me towards him.

Yet, my favourite writer in those days was someone else - a writer called Anant Kanekar, whose short essays I really enjoyed. I read the writings of B.V. Varerkar, G.T. Madkholkar and P.K. Atre around this time. The writings of Vibhavari Shirurkar and Vishram Bedekar drew me towards them, too, but no one could take the place Kanekar occupied in my heart. I remember, how I rushed to Margao one day, because someone told me that Kanekar was there. I had to see what my favourite author looked like.

I still enjoy Kanekar's writing. His books remind me of a waft of cool breeze as I sit on the embankment by the field when I go for a walk every evening.

When I was reading Marathi, the Portuguese language also opened its doors and drew me into its fold. It was a Marathi writer, Professor Lakshmanrao Sardesai, who introduced me to Portuguese literature. He taught Portuguese very well and it was he, who introduced me to Jose Saramago's *As pupilas do senhor Rotor*. Later, when we parted ways, I roamed freely in the world of Portuguese literature, picking up and reading books at will. Diniz's *Os Fidalgos da Casa Mourisca* and *Uma Familia Inglesa* were even better than *As pupilas..*, I thought.

There is no doubt that the Portuguese poet Luis de Camões featured amongst the foremost writers in the world. But I took strong exception to the way in which his characters poke fun at Indians in his epic poem *Lusiadas*. I accepted him as a great poet, but he was not one of my favourites, I preferred Almeida Garrett.

I knew parts of Garrett's play *Frei Luis d'Souza* by heart and had read his *Viajens Na Minha Terra* more than once. It was Garrett who taught me that 'good' writing is possible only when each word has been chosen with care, when each sentence has been pruned and polished.

Yet, Garrett was not the best Portuguese writer I had come across.

lot belonged to Ramalho Ortigão, who I believe, is the most fearless Portuguese writer of all time. He poked fun at human frailties, and was only Portuguese writer to criticise those in power. I still enjoy his work and firmly believe that if one is a writer, one should be like Ramalho.

The Portuguese language was benevolent to me in yet another way. It kept me confined to its own literature but took me on a tour of the world, introducing me to literary greats like Balzac and Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Faulkner. And as my tastes developed in their company, my respect for my own names in the Marathi literary world began to decrease. I do not think very highly of them even now. But there is one exception - Sharad Chhatrapati Babu. He was a Bengali writer. But we read his works in Marathi translation, and considered him a writer in that language.

There were two educated women who loved literature, living in Panaji in those days. Dona Propérzia and Dona Flora were teachers and they had an immense influence on students living in Panaji. They would read good books and talk about them to their students, and soon the youngsters would compete amongst themselves trying to lay hands on these books. I remember reading Marcel Carrel's *O Homem Esse Desconhecido* (*Man, the Unknown*) at that time. I read the book again some time back but I cannot declare confidently that I understood all of it. Yet, I thought I'd understood it perfectly in my childhood. In those days there was nothing that I couldn't understand.

My favourite writer in those days was Stefan Zweig, who could descend into the human heart and describe the turmoil within, in minute detail. He taught me that even the humblest of characters had something unique about them; it was important to understand human nature, rather than to judge a person as being good, or evil or humble. Some thirty or thirty two of Zweig's books were available in Portuguese translation and I read all of them. I was such a devoted fan that I read some books more than once, and I considered everything that the author said as the absolute truth. Zweig declared that Balzac was a great writer, so I accepted that without question. When he believed that Marcel Proust and Tolstoy were great writers, I accepted that too. Zweig declared that Brazil was a beautiful country, so it must be beautiful; I thought. I would look for the books written by all the writers Zweig held in high regard, and read them with great care. If I could have had someone to teach me German in those days, I would have learnt the language only to read Zweig's books in their original form. He is still one of my favourite writers. If I had devoted my whole life to translating Zweig's books into Konkani, I feel, it would have been a life well spent.

Khalil Gibran entered my life soon after Zweig did. I had begun to read books in English, and Gibran led me into the deepest recesses of the human mind. Life is not all about what appears on the surface; the true meaning of life lies deep within. I must have read Gibran's *The Prophet* over fifteen times, and I must have bought the book as many times to give it to others. I gave this book to couples as a wedding gift, in those

days. When a man's heart overflows with happiness he cannot rest himself from sharing this joy. I, too, have enjoyed Gibran and shared with many.

The point I'm trying to make here is that a prolific reader cannot go to a single writer and declare that he is the favourite one. We are drawn to different writers at different stages in our lives. New names appear on our list of favourite writers as Time passes, and it becomes difficult to choose one name over another one. My list of favourites continues to grow, and I enjoy each one's work, equally.

Now, let's look at another question - Why do we read books?

We read books to gain knowledge. Man seeks information about different topics at different times in his life, and at such times he looks for books that deal with the matter that interests him. When I was seeking Truth, I turned to Vivekananda. When I got involved in Goa's liberation movement, I delved into Indian history, and H.G. Wells also helped me understand history of the world. The rise and fall of different civilisations was demonstrated by Arnold Toynbee, and the desire to learn about modern political science led me to Karl Marx. I must be one of the few persons who has read every word of his *Das Capital* from beginning to end with the utmost devotion. Marx's work is tedious, yet he intoxicates the reader and wins him over with views that are one-sided and arbitrary. Someone once said that any twenty-five year old, who reads Marx and doesn't get drawn to Communism must be fainthearted. At the same time, anyone who is over thirty and is still influenced by Marx's views must be - half-brained. I subscribe to this view, too.

I read quite a bit of Communist literature around this time and quite enjoyed Rosa Luxemburg's writing.

During the Partition, as the country was being divided into two, I felt the need to learn about religion and the social sciences, and it was then that I came upon Max Weber's work. It was only then that I understood how a man like Savarkar, who did not believe in God or religion, heaven or hell, still chose to side with the Hindus in politics; and how the anglicised Mohammed Ali Jinnah, who did not even read the Koran, became the leader of the Muslim political forces.

Linguistics and the study of languages drew me to several specialised books when I began working for Konkani. I consider Suniti Kumar Chatterji to be a leading figure in linguistics, as for Noam Chomsky, he can be called the Einstein in this field.

I have been drawn to books written by the Rationalists of the Thinkers' Library, and was a great fan of Bertrand Russell at one time. George Bernard Shaw also entered my life at this stage.

When I began reading about sex I was won over by Marie Stopes' *Marriage, Love and Enduring Passions*. I also liked Von d'Volde's *Ideal Marriage* very much. I read books on social science, economics and psychology because I wanted

learn more about these fields. Fortunately, this childlike curiosity is still alive in me, and I keep looking for new topics to pursue and learn about. One such native book I read recently, was Gunnar Myrdal's *Asian Drama*.

I read books because he seeks information about various things. It also satisfy another latent need - the need for good company. We are surrounded by meeting cultured, multi-talented people whose stories and experiences transport us out of the humdrum of daily existence into a strange new world. This journey is as enjoyable as any physical journey to strange, exotic places. Books help us interact with characters whom we would never meet under normal circumstances, be it Vyasa or Valmiki, Goethe or Shakespeare. We enjoy the company of people who might have lived thousands of years ago, or people who live thousands of miles away, for books transcend distances of time and space, and help us enjoy their company even as we sit in our homes. I read stories and fables, poems and plays because I seek such company.

My interaction with Kakasaheb Kalelkar made me realise an important thing - some writers are greater persons than the body of work they leave behind. I enjoyed Kakasaheb's writing in Marathi and Gujarati. I had the good fortune to be closely associated with him, and I feel that his writing, though great, does not reflect the true greatness of the man and his life.

Therefore, I choose to divide writers into two groups - one, where the writer's personality and his life are greater than the work he produces; the other, where the writer's work is greater than the life he leads. I believe that the first group is more praiseworthy.

It was then that I realised the greatness of Tolstoy and Tagore and became a devoted fan of both. My favourite writer in this category is Mahatma Gandhi, but Socrates, (or should I say Plato, for Socrates did not write anything himself,) has joined this group recently.

I started this essay, seeking to find my favourite book. As I went along I named a host of writers who had fascinated me at different stages. I am sure, after all, if someone invites me to a wedding, I take my wife and children, family and friends along. Besides, I expect that my host will be delighted to see the group and force us to stay for the festive meal. So, should anyone be surprised if I've introduced a host of writers and their best books, even though my brief was to name my favourite one?

Perhaps the question should have been framed like this

'If you were to be locked in prison for a year with only one book for company, what book would that be?'

What would I say to that? *The Mahabharata*, of course. This is a book that I read and re-read, not just for a year, but for my whole life. The ore from this bottomless mine can never be exhausted. I agree with this line from the *Mahabharata*, 'What you get here, you will get in many other places. What is

not here, is nowhere at all.' If this book is with me, I shall not feel confined even though my space is limited to a prison cell; I shall not feel lonely, though I'm locked there by myself. The *Mahabharata* takes us close to Sri Krishna and in His company, we lead blessed lives. It is indeed a fortunate man, who can boast of such company.

There is another set of books I revere as much as the *Mahabharata* and those are the *Upanishads*. While the former takes us close to Sri Krishna, the *Upanishads* transport us into the presence of the Supreme Being who resides deep within our souls. When we approach His presence, a voice says, 'Don't measure your worth in tonnes and maunds, your worth is not something that can be weighed. Don't forget that I love you, and your worth is based on this love.' How reassuring are these words!

Someone once said, 'What the Himalayas are amongst mountains, the *Upanishads* are amongst books.' They were written thousands of years ago. When one digs a well, a lot of scum and other debris comes up to the surface along with the water. The *Upanishads* and the *Mahabharata* too, contain a lot of such debris. It is up to the reader to remove the scum and separate the debris from the clear water beneath. Only then can he reach the nectar.

The sages who wrote the *Upanishads* had seen the 'Divine One'. 'He' is present in everything that is born, that lives on this earth, and then dies,' they wrote confidently. No other books have soared to such lofty heights or plunged to infinite depths. The *Upanishads* seem fresh and new, always. They bring comfort and fill me with happiness, so I turn to them again and again.

So, even when asked to name a book that I can turn to again and again, throughout my life, I am forced to give two names. Shall I never be able to settle for a single book which I love the most?

There is one such book, but it is not written on paper, it has not passed through a printing press, nor is it available in any library. It cannot be put in a cupboard like other books, yet anyone can read it, anywhere. There is no effort involved in reading this book, nor is there any chance of the reader getting bored. I turn to this book when I cannot find what I need anywhere else, and it teaches me something new, each time. It supports me when I am dejected, encourages me and tells stories that no one has ever told me, before. It has introduced me to the 'Supreme One' and transports me to His presence and inspires me to live.

This favourite book I talk of, is *Nature*. By this I mean the earth and all the rivers and hills, the lakes and streams and oceans upon it. By *Nature* I mean trees and bushes, flowers and fruits and all vegetation. I refer to birds and beasts, insects and all living things. To Mankind, and all the emotions in man's heart. To the sun and the moon and the stars in the night sky.

Call it eccentricity, if you must, but I cannot dismiss *Nature* as being lifeless and emotionless. *Nature* speaks to me freely, and affectionately. I therefore have no hesitation in stating that my favourite book is *Nature*, itself.

THE SYMPHONY OF LIGHT

Baba said to me, one morning, as soon as I woke up, 'These days you can see a very bright comet in the eastern sky, very early in the morning ...' I'd read about this in *The Times*, the previous day. I began to wake up at daybreak after this. How could I lie in bed and miss such a rare spectacle? This comet, which had appeared after a gap of twelve hundred years, would only be visible for eight or ten days. It would not be fitting to miss it on a chance.

The first morning I could only catch a glimpse of its tail, the rest of it hidden behind the hillock. As days passed, it rose higher in the sky, and when I last saw it, it had moved towards the south. What an imposing spectacle that was! This comet, after its tryst with the Sun, was dashing off at a speed of thousands of kilometers a second, to explore unknown space.

The comet *Ikeya Seki* came into view, and then dashed off again, but I went to wake up at dawn. These days I wake up at daybreak and sit on my bed watching the light grow stronger outside my window.

Since my room is on the western side of the house I cannot watch the sun

rise, but when a faint blush appears on the cheek of the western sky, I hear the foot steps of the approaching sun. Wisps of cloud scatter crimson flecks in the sky before being carried away by the breeze. On days when these clouds fail to appear, even the faint rays of the sun seem to smile at them, but these clouds do not disappoint us for long. At least one wisp of cloud floats into view and the rays seem to smile, making one's heart rejoice. It's been a week now, that I've been watching the clouds and the sun rays at play. I used to get up at daybreak and recite verses from the *Upanishads*, but I don't do that any longer. As I watch the spectacle unfold in the sky, my mind feels pure and cleansed, my body grows strong.

There is a mango tree in front of my window, and beyond that, on the horizon, is the hillock at Veling. I lower my eyes from the spectacle in the sky and my gaze rests on the various shades of green.

The mango tree is covered with leaves, these days, I think there are more leaves than there were last year. While the old ones have fallen to the ground the fresh leaves that have emerged create a riot of colour. Some leaves are tender and freshly unfurled, with a delicate reddish pink hue. There are leaves which must have emerged only a few days earlier, they boast of a shade between yellow and green. The rest of the leaves must have unfolded at different times, some have been around for a week, some for a fortnight, and some for a month. The green shade of the leaves varies according to their age, sometimes it is pale, sometimes it is dark, some leaves appear yellowish green while others are tinged with a blackish hue.

If a single mango tree can bear so many shades of green, imagine how many variations of this tint appear as Nature rejuvenates itself, rising in waves and bursting into thick foliage in the area between the mango and the Veling hillock!

Dew falls at this time and every plant and tree seems freshly bathed and bursting with life. After days of close observation I have begun to feel that every plant has a distinct identity of its own. Plants are born, they grow and then they die. They have life in them and can laugh and cry as they feel happiness and sorrow. It's not their fault that they cannot express emotions like we do, they have certain signals that help them communicate amongst themselves.

The Lord said, 'If you look for me in the world of plants, I am the peepal tree. In Goa, however, it is the coconut palm that occupies this eminent position. There is a magnificent peepal tree by the Santeri temple beside my house, but even this tree knows its limitations!

The only tree that dares to rise higher than the coconut palm is the *sanvar* or silk cotton. And when it rises to such heights, all the other trees know that the '*denvchar*' or evil spirit is lurking amidst its leaves.

My mind is at peace as I wallow in this quiet, peaceful aspect of nature. The greenery all around seems to shimmer in the growing light and one

dranath's poems comes to mind, 'Of all that is beautiful in this world,
d, you are the most beautiful.'

ven as the first line comes to my lips, my ears are struck by a medley
unds, as though innumerable birds are chirping a chorus, a paean of
to the Lord! I can distinguish the rooster's call and the cawing of
s amidst the chirruping of smaller birds. The woodpecker beats a
dy rhythm and the partridge bursts into song. Each bird calls out in its
distinctive fashion, but look what a magnificent symphony results,
single note seems out of place.

haven't seen too many of the birds that are native to Goa. I believe
birds should be heard, not seen. I sit with my ears agog, listening to
symphony of bird calls ... it is a difficult process, more difficult than
itation, for one's mind has to be completely silent ... but I have
aged to do this, sometimes.

o, on the one hand, I listen to the music of the colours with my eyes;
he other, I watch the colour of the music with my ears - this mixed-up
aphor seems accurate to describe my feelings, and soon the whole
h seems to burst into song.

Yesterday, all of a sudden, I began to wonder why we use
term 'lifeless' to describe this earth, from whose womb
of creation has emerged. I now see the Lord in stones, in
ter, **in iron, in fire ... everywhere**

I am drawn at once to every aspect of Nature, and can appreciate
ure's various 'moods'. Morning appears like someone setting out in
rch of something. Afternoon appears ready to start some new chore.
ning seems ready to set out for a stroll in the hills. I woke up at midnight,
e, and saw Night sitting in meditation.

Our hearts and minds wilt under the weight of bad experiences so we
not appreciate Nature in all its varied forms. Otherwise, every hour in
e day and each of the six seasons in the year would be calling out to us
h something new.

I was on my way to Margao in the afternoon, the day before yesterday
d had reached the bridge at Mardol when my eyes fell on the Madkai
ock in the distance. Masses of white clouds were gathered in the sky
ound the hill top, like flowers in a woman's hair. The bus wouldn't arrive
another ten minutes, so I stood in the shade of the mango tree by the
isque, and feasted my eyes on the sight. The clouds took on various
apes as they were tossed by the breeze but they remained clustered
out the hill.

I turned to my left and saw that clouds were gathered there, too, but

when I turned around to look behind me, I saw that the thickest mass were in that direction!

A flood of sun light poured down on to the ground, and while coconut palms and other trees swayed in the light, tiny dragonflies, intoxicated by the light and warmth, hopped about in a drunken dance. I didn't know what to do. Suddenly I realised that I was standing in the shade, so I stepped out into the sun ... I don't know why the moon and moonlight are considered so intoxicating. Is sunlight less beautiful?

When I was studying at Panaji I'd go to the Campal in the afternoon. I hadn't acquired the trappings of the 'sophisticated' set, but that didn't mean that I couldn't appreciate beauty. The Mandovi, like me, had emerged from the wilderness, so she wasn't embarrassed about rushing off to meet the sea at the height of noon. The palm trees at Betim-Verem, on the other side of the river, had not been instructed in sophisticated behaviour, either, so the trees on the river and I became friends. Till I became involved in other activities and had to break this friendship.

Some afternoons, when I take a boat at the ferry crossing, I suddenly remember the past, 'What a good life that was!' I say to myself. 'Why, what's wrong with the present?', a part of me asks, for my friendship with the river and the palm trees continues, still.

The sky at daybreak is quite different from the sky as it appears in the evening. The morning sky, bedecked and bejewelled, bears a veneer of modesty, but the evening sky is brazen about her wanton charms with the seven colours of the rainbow scattered all over her person. In a little while the sun begins to set, and only three shades remain- ochre, red and a pale orange. The three hues merge very soon, and one cannot tell them apart.

If it is an evening just after the rains, the whole sky shimmers golden and an aura of fecundity settles over trees and other vegetation.

The creative force of life is evident all through the year in Antruz, the region where I live, and the vegetation remains fresh and green even at the height of summer. Since the area is surrounded by hills, we cannot see the crimson sunrise or the sunset. Dusk falls in our region as soon as the sun slips behind the hills. When the sky above is stained with myriad colours, the hills seem infected by this excitement and one is tempted to scramble up the slope to see where the sun, the source of all this excitement, has hidden himself. But even before one can reach the summit, the sky takes on another hue - this is not blue, nor is it grey or black, it is a nameless shade, I call it the 'colour of prayer'. Sometimes one sees a pale ochre streak cutting across this shade for an instant, then the earth turns silent and is at peace.

Even an atheist would be inspired to pray at such a time. I feel the sages must have composed Vedic prayers at such moments.

don't think I have missed out on enjoying a single evening in my life. Soon as the sun begins to set, I train my eyes on the sky above and the memorable evenings have passed like a wonderful dream. Many sea-lapped evenings on the beach have helped me understand the complexities of this journey between birth and death. The forty or fifty bound evenings spent in the Himalayas have whispered of an existence before birth and after death. The *aarti* on devotion-filled evenings at Haridwar and the revulsion spurred by evenings at Kashi's Manikarnika have introduced me to our country's rich heritage, with all its warts. And the fifteen or twenty evenings spent in the cool shade of the Bodhi tree at Bodhi Gaya a couple of years ago have given me an insight into the truths that lie open before us.

As evening falls, my mind turns inwards and the eyes begin to flit about the sky within my heart. This space is as extensive and boundless as the heaven above, and I realise that there is no difference at all between that which is rooted and that which is eternally alive and in motion.

The planet Venus appears in the western sky in the evening these days. Don't be disheartened by the darkness that will fall. You will see a new universe countless times as big and vibrant as the world you have seen all this while ...' it seems to say. Venus shines brighter than any other planet these days, so that it may grab our attention and make us listen to its words. Let us pay heed at once, or it may curse us and stop appearing in the evening sky. Then, we might have to wake up at daybreak to catch a glimpse of Venus, like we did when the comet *Ikeya Seki* passed by. Let us get familiar with the night sky before Venus turns away in frustration, for then, the Moon will entice us with the allure of its moonbeams

And our knowledge of the Boundless will remain incomplete.

MY INTIMATE PALS

The room I stayed in, in Andheri, was really wonderful, quite beyond anything I had expected. If one walks eastwards from the station, for five to ten minutes, one comes to Gundvali, a neighbourhood that is like a little village. There are tiny huts all over the place and in their midst is a bungalow called 'The Nest'. I lived in a room on the upper floor of this house.

I don't think any other Goan has enjoyed this village-like ambience in the midst of the filth and squalor of Mumbai.

I heard the songs of birds even before the first rays of the morning sun fell upon my eyes, and at night the stars in the sky would converse with me. More importantly, my heart was filled with fresh, young dreams, inspired by the greenery on all sides.

An ancient tree stood just before this house, it must have been two or three hundred years old. Its massive branches, with their thick canopy of leaves, stretched out on all sides and some of them even seemed to touch the sky. It was as though this tree was stretching out its arms to embrace the whole universe.

After flying about all day, the weary birds of Andheri sought shelter in its

branches at dusk. Squirrels darted playfully all over its branches like children flinging themselves into a fond grandfather's arms. Who knows how many generations of birds had grown up amidst its leaves, how many generations of squirrels had darted up and down its trunk! When the moonlight lay thick upon the ground on a full moon night, I have seen Darkness take fright and seek shelter in its confines.

The first thing I'd set eyes upon every morning, was this tree. It was like an elderly member of my family and I spent almost a year there drawing strength from its mere presence.

Suddenly, one morning, I saw that its branches were strewn on the ground. Someone had lopped off the branches and made deep gashes over the trunk. My mind was filled with innumerable questions, who had committed this dastardly act? What were the people of Gundvali doing when this evil creature was committing this crime? Why didn't they protect it?

Tears rushed into my eyes as I gazed at this sight. I was distraught, though an elderly member of my family had suddenly taken ill. I was told that someone had purchased that site and was planning to construct a bungalow on that spot. I cursed that person roundly — if my curses were to bear fruit that man would have burnt to ashes, certainly, his progeny would have died a painful death!

I stopped looking in that direction from that day. Soon, I packed my belongings and moved to Goa.

This was the story of a tree that was killed by man. I know of a tree that withered and turned dry and finally died, yet its presence was regal, it had the aura of a mystic saint.

I was studying at the Almeida College in Ponda in those days. I stayed at the Internaton in Ponda returning home to Priol every Saturday. Sometimes I would walk the entire distance. In those days the track that led to Farmagudi passed by the Safa mosque. There was a huge mango tree on the hillock by the stone quarry and I'd often stop in its shade to catch my breath after the steep climb. I'd often hear the wind whispering amongst its leaves. Who knows how far the wind had travelled, what sights it must have seen — but the stories it told the mango tree must have been entertaining ones indeed, for the leaves would rustle with laughter and the mango tree would sway in mirth.

One day the leaves on the top most branches began to wither and fall. Soon, the lower branches turned dry and before I realised that the tree was dying, the trunk, too, turned brittle and dry. While the trees around it were in full bloom with new foliage, the mango tree continued to shed its leaves, till one day, only the withered trunk and branches remained. Yet, this did not detract from the grandeur of the scene, the old tree still held sway along that patch of the track.

I could hear its conversation with the wind, I gathered so much wisdom

from that site.

One day someone chopped the tree down for firewood. I thought Farmagudi looked like a widow that day. A temple has been built in that region today, but the streak of vermilion Farmagudi proudly bore on its brow has been missing since then

I would visit that spot sometimes, to see that helpless stump and tangle of roots that once provided strength to that massive mango tree. But these have also vanished with time.

I am extremely fond of trees, they seem a part of my family. But I'm not the only one to be inspired to poetic heights. Even men who earn their living by felling trees in the forest are delighted by the sight of fresh buds and flowers and fruits on healthy trees. It's just that they cannot express their sentiments.

Why do we feel such pleasure when we see trees? Is it because we cannot survive without leaves and flowers and fruits? Or is it because they provide the oxygen we need to breathe?

Trees are useful in many ways. We use their leaves, flowers, fruits, seeds and roots. The amount of rain that falls is linked to the vegetation that covers the earth. And it is this cover of vegetation that ensures that rain water sinks into the earth. We depend on trees for food and water, for the air we breathe. Our debt to the plant world is immeasurable. Is that the only reason we are attracted to them?

I don't think so. We are drawn to trees as instinctively as an infant is drawn to its mother. The ties that bind us to the plant world are more close than the ties of blood.

It is said that the first form of life that appeared on earth was a species of plant life that lived in water. In other words, green leaves appeared on earth before red blood did, there was grass on the ground before the first cow came into existence. Life continued in this manner for about six crores of years. It was only later that two distinct branches developed - the animal world and that of plants, both of which continued to be dependant on the other.

At that earliest point of the evolutionary process, animals procreated by laying eggs while plants bore fruits like the walnut and coconut which had hard protective shells. Later, some species of animals stopped laying eggs and began to nurture their young within their bodies. Plants, too, began to bear fruit with thinner skins; they drew sustenance from the earth through their roots and their leaves used sunlight to produce food. Brightly coloured flowers attracted butterflies and the nectar in the flowers drew birds who scattered the seeds all over the world and helped in propagation.

And what about human beings? The tiny creature that was as small as a rat developed into the tall, strapping figure we call Man. He ate fruits. His intellect developed and he remained distinct from other animals. He developed the power of speech and communication. And one day, after and

evolution of almost six crore years, he left the other members of his species the orangutan, the chimpanzee and the gorilla behind as he forged ahead. He owed much of this progress to his kinship with plants. Even today, after feeding on his mother's milk for about a year, the human being depends on the plant kingdom with its leaves, fruits, flowers, and roots that provide him with sustenance throughout his life.

This interaction with the plant world that has continued for over twelve crore years must be influencing us subconsciously, or why would we feel so attracted to plants? Do the cat, or the dog feel any such mystic communion with the world of plants? Do they appreciate the beauty of flowers? The structure of their brains is different from that of Man.

There was a peepal tree in front of our house in Diu and most of my experiences in childhood are associated with this tree. As the old leaves fell to the ground and fresh green leaves sprouted on its branches, hope and enthusiasm would be kindled in my heart. So many years have passed since I left Diu, and so many peepal trees have come my way. There is a peepal by our house in Priol, which has become my companion these days. There is a peepal by the bridge at Mardol, which I pass when I go for a walk every evening. How many lofty plans have we drawn while sitting on the stone seat built around its trunk! How many of those have we pursued and fulfilled! This tree has also been a dear companion in my life, yet, the only tree that appears in my dreams is the peepal at Diu.

A couple of years ago, when I visited Diu after sixteen long years, I rushed to see this peepal. I am sure it must have been delighted to see me too, for its leaves rustled in pleasure. As for me, I was filled with delight at being reunited with a very dear friend.

I am familiar with all the trees in Priol, but my deepest association is with the jambul tree that stands beside the track leading to our ancestral house. It is almost obscured by cashew trees. As a child I often passed along that track and spent many pleasant hours beneath it. I hardly go there once or twice a year, these days, but when I do I always pause by its side. But the tree doesn't speak to me as freely as it did in the past. It's grown old ... but the sense of happiness remains the same.

Some people say that the babul is the ugliest tree they have ever seen, but I lost my heart to a scrawny specimen in Wardha. There are many beautiful trees flanking the Circuit road but the babul near Kakawadi became my *Laila*, and it taught me a very important truth – it is not true that only beautiful subjects attract the viewer. If you have an emotional attachment to a subject that is physically ugly you will begin to see signs of beauty in it, I learnt.

I can enumerate the various trees that I have been associated with. For reasons why they have been special to me, the list will be long. Here, a banyan there, a mango, a jackfruit, a palm ... trees that have captured a place in my heart, there's the

the jasmine, the colocasia and even grass. Creepers bearing the white flowers have taught me that fragrance is more important than colour and the 'touch-me-not' creeper has brought home a very important truth. 'No matter how difficult the situation, no matter what loss I have to incur, I will not take a single step that goes against my conscience, I will not step beyond a certain moral code' This is the essence of morality and strength of character that every flower embodies and the modest 'touch-me-not' blossom occupies an important place in my heart as the magnificent Bodhi tree.

I look upon the humble blade of grass as a triumphant banner held aloft by the winds of Life that have vanquished Death. Some plants remind me of venerable sages, hoary with age, while others seem like infants fresh out of the womb. I can recognise plants and trees by the sounds they make, too. When a breeze wanders and makes amorous advances setting trees and plants quivering in response, a strange hum and rustle fills the air and I try to guess which plant makes it is that makes this delightful sound.

There is one species on this earth that one can love with all one's heart - the plant species. Trees and plants are more generous and loving than us humans, and strange though it may sound, they are more attractive, too.

As human beings evolved from one stage to another they shared a very cordial relationship with the plant world. It was only later that Man destroyed this relationship seeking to subjugate Nature and make her his slave. Spurred by this evil intent, he sets forth with an axe and cuts down trees and plants at will. I am enraged by this activity and when I encounter someone cutting down trees at will I would like nothing better than to grab the axe and aim it at the person's skull.

One thing is certain -

Millions of years ago, when our forefathers stopped laying eggs and began to nurture their young within their bodies, a sense of kinship and affection for one's fellow creatures was born in their breasts. This feeling must have been reflected in other living creatures, even ferocious ones like lions and tigers, I feel. Around the same time plants evolved by bearing fruits with bright, thin skins rather than the hard shell-encased fruits that they bore until then. I am sure some feeling of affection and kinship must have developed in the plant world, too, perhaps that is what Jagadish Chandra Bose referred to when he wrote about 'souls' in plants.

I am certain this 'soul' will help bridge the chasm that has developed between Man and the plant world in recent times and renew the close ties that have existed for centuries. A day will come when Man will recognise that trees and plants are symbols of tradition and civilisation. Inspired by this thought he will strive to make this earth a beautiful garden, where mankind can coexist with other species in a humane fashion.

Perhaps the spirit of the plant world will make Man strive towards this goal. Trees and plants exert a very potent force in our lives. Even the Buddha achieved enlightenment under a tree.

A LOVE OF THE HIMALAYAS

I set out for the Himalayas in 1956. At first I wasn't very clear why I wanted to go there. I'd read reports written by people who had visited those mountains. I knew some of them. What I heard about their experiences made me decide that I should make the trip. There was something about the region that made my hair stand on end. I'd go to those remote places which were inaccessible to most, I'd gaze at Nature's beautiful forms and the pious, deeply spiritual atmosphere seep into my being. I was young, strong and my heart was filled with excitement.

I took a train from Delhi to Haridwar, Rishikesh and then travelled to Dehradun, near Tehri, by bus. The next forty five days were spent in trekking up and down mountain slopes, crossing rivers and cutting through numerous forests. Trekking ten to fifteen miles a day I covered the six hundred odd miles that took me to Yamunotri, Gangotri, Kedar and Badri, the four major Himalayan shrines located in Uttarakhand.

When I returned home, I was a different person. My inner being was rejuvenated, my soul had become rich.

A man undergoes a transformation when he returns home from the

Himalayas. It is as though he is born again. Memories of beautiful sights fill his heart, but his mind is charged with spiritualism. These mountains make him aware of the Truth that lies beneath all appearance, and returns with a new perspective and attitude towards life.

I hear that buses ply right up to Yamunotri and Gangotri these days. Buses and motor cars are the trappings of *Kali Yug*, and will no doubt reach the Himalayas, too. These mountains should be explored on foot. Nature does not unfold itself before those who are in a hurry to rush past. If you cannot spare the time to listen to what Nature is saying, I feel there is no point in making such a trip.

A person who travels to the Himalayas should, first of all, unshackle himself from the ties that bind him to the past and to the future. He should not be bowed down by the weight of bitter — sweet memories and experiences garnered in the past. Nor should he be spurred by colourful dreams of the future. He should only be concerned with the present moment and should experience it in the fullest possible manner. A man who lives in the present keeps his eyes and ears open, and thus he can see and hear things in the keenest possible way. One goes to the Himalayas to see what one has never seen before, to hear what one has never heard before. Those who rush through the trip miss out on all these truths.

It was after visiting Gangotri and Yamunotri, when we were heading towards Kedarnath, that we reached a spot called Bhairav Ghati. This place is at a height of about eleven thousand feet and we were exhausted after the steep climb, but what a sight it was that met our eyes — wave upon wave of mountain ranges stretched out like a mighty ocean before us. Naresh Mantri, one of the members of our group, was so overwhelmed by this celestial sight that he broke into a verse from the *Upanishad*,

'Listen, O men! I have seen the "One" who dwells in holy places, tearing asunder the darkness of the night ...'

Mantri might have really glimpsed the Divine One, his excitement was contagious and I was overwhelmed, too. We had seen glimpses of the profound and holy aspect of Nature over the last few days, but this was more awe-inspiring than any we had encountered so far.

I was so overwhelmed that I wanted to fling myself down into the abyss, to destroy the body that kept my soul from merging with this spectacular sight. When I expressed my thoughts Naresh explained that the followers of the Bhairav sect often committed suicide at this spot, which is how the place got its name.

We are told that Sage Vyasa composed the *Mahabharata* in the Himalayas. We do not know where the Upanishads were written, perhaps they were composed in the Himalayas, too. Where else could Man get true knowledge of the infinite? There is no sense in making a distinction

between animate and inanimate objects; where, but in the Himalayas, can we learn that the life force exists in all of creation.

Nature teaches us many important lessons in the Himalayas. But we must keep the doors of our minds open and learn to 'see' and 'hear' correctly, only then can these truths be understood.

Nature does not grow old and stale with age, but remains fresh and vibrant as though it has just been created. '*Shantam Shivam Advaitam*', this is the basic truth of Nature, the Himalayas seem to say. We see turbulent storms in Nature, but it is peace, not turbulence that is the predominant characteristic. Sorrow and impoverishment can be seen in Nature, but it is fecundity and plenitude that are the most dominant characteristics. Destruction and degradation may cause a fragmentation of its various parts, but it is the union of all these parts, the monism that runs through Nature that is the most abiding characteristic. This is a truth that one learns in the Himalayas.

I learnt another truth when we reached Kedarnath late in the evening. I was exhausted after the long trek. It was very cold and I lay down, wrapped in a blanket, in one of the rooms at the Kali Kamliwaley dharamshala. At about eight in the night one of the members of our group rushed in and urged us to come and watch the *aarti*, being performed in the temple. I did not come to Kedarnath on a pilgrimage. The *aarti* and other temple rituals didn't matter to me, so I demurred, but the man was insistent. 'You mustn't miss the *aarti*, it's a spectacular experience,' he said and I followed him into the temple.

The ritual had been on for ten minutes or so when I arrived, and I must admit I was glad that I didn't miss this unique experience. It was as though a cross section of Indian society was here, dancing to the tinkling of bells. There were people from Punjab and Bengal, from Kerala and from Gujarat — people from diverse backgrounds, with nothing in common — here we were, dancing to the strains of the *bhajan* '*Jai Jagadeesh Hare*', bound together by the ties of faith.

Our people reside in different parts of the country, and speak a variety of languages. Our society is broken up into upper and lower castes, we include certain sections of people while others are excluded from mainstream activities — yet we are bound together by these ties of faith. These bonds must never be frayed or loosened. Nor should they degenerate into a network of blindly followed rules.

The *samadhi* of Shankaracharya was beside the temple. The seer had proclaimed that Brahma, the power of creation, was Truth and the *Jagat* or material world was false illusion. But today, the message I received from that holy spot was that Unity was Truth and Diversity was false.

I returned from the Himalayas with this fervent conviction. As I stood at the

Har ki Pauri after this sojourn of forty five days I realised that I had travelled through Uttarakhand. The Himalayas stretch up to Kashmir places like Kulu Manali, Nainital, Almora, Kasauli, and even Darjeeling Sikkim fall within its folds. I wanted to travel along the entire range couldn't do so in one continuous trip I would settle for several small trips but I would travel across the whole range some day.

We make many resolutions in life but many of these wither away with time. Mine did too. I travelled to Kashmir after this, and went up to Pahalgam. I went to Darjeeling and visited Sikkim as well. But the exhilaration experienced in Uttarakhand was missing during these trips, The Himalayas in Uttarakhand cannot be compared with those parts of the mountain range that lie elsewhere.

The Himalayas are not merely a series of ice-capped mountain peaks. Nor are they mere forests of deodar trees or gushing rivers and mountain streams. The word Himalaya conjures up an aura of the Divine spiritual atmosphere that stimulates piety and penance.

I cannot walk like I used to, these days. But, who knows, if I go back to Uttarakhand, maybe I'll be inspired to walk ten or fifteen miles a day to cover the six hundred miles of the trek as I did before. But ...

In 1956, I returned home after my sojourn in the Himalayas. If I go there again, I may never return.

A STRAIN OF REGRET

I heard a strain of regret, yet again, in Nature's symphony today. When I woke up this morning, the sun was just above the horizon and the eastern sky was flushed crimson. The shards of cloud scattered overhead seemed to come with mirth, and I began to bask in their joy.

How beautiful was this morning, as delicate as a *parijat* blossom, I thought. Birds sang. Dew drops trembled on leaves and twigs. Nature seemed to be bursting with life, and this joy overflowed from every pore.

At times like this my mind is absolutely calm and free of all thoughts. My eyes gaze out at the world, and my ears listen keenly and suddenly hear that strain of complaint and regret.

This world does not grow old or stale with age, there is not a wrinkle on my brow. It renews and rejuvenates itself constantly, so it appears fresh and beautiful, as though it has just been created.

Yet, how is it that no one has the time to even see this beauty, let alone appreciate it? When Nature's joy is overflowing in every direction, most people are asleep. The few who are awake are caught up in their own worries, they have work to do. They have duties which they cannot shirk

in order to participate in Nature's joys. Nature calls out to them, 'O wretched people! Look at me ... You will get all the answers you seek me ...!' But no one hears its call.

A vast desert, more boundless than the Sahara, separates us from Nature these days. This vast space is filled with dry emotions like selfishness and mounting needs. Our inability to satisfy these growing needs fills us with resentment and regret, and we are consumed with worry. As a result, we fail to see anything, though we have eyes. We hear nothing, though we have ears. We have shut our eyes and ears, our hearts and minds are barred.

A poet, I forget his name, sees a wilted flower and exclaims 'How did you get to this state? How fresh you'd bloomed this morning ...!' The flower replies, 'What can I say? I came, resplendent in colour and perfume with a message of love from your beloved. I waited for you to read the letter ...waited in vain, all day. But no one accepted the message ...no one had the time. So I'm disheartened, that's why I wilt.'

It is this strain of regret that I see in Nature.

The area around Gangotri is calm and quiet. I have seen the Ganga warbling a song of serenity as she sets off on her journey. She plunges down the mountain sides and forces her way through nooks and crannies, meeting her sister streams, the Mandakini and the Alakananda, in the Himalayas. These rivers add their serene voices to her melody and her music continues to swell as they rush past Rishikesh. By the time the Ganga reaches Varanasi, though, she is disheartened. It seems as though she would like to turn back. She continues her journey, nevertheless, passing through Aryavarta, drawing other sisters into her fold, till finally she reaches the sea in Bengal. She has travelled thousands of miles, crossed innumerable villages and settlements, flowed past countless men and women, singing her song of serenity. But no one has heard her music, no one has paid attention to these strains.

When I looked down from the aeroplane while travelling to Japan, I saw these wrinkles of regret and accusation on her brow. I have seen shades of regret appear on the faces of other rivers too, no one pays attention to us, we do not appreciate us, these rivers seem to say.

Human beings do not awaken easily. This is why Nature waits patiently through the ages, this is why it doesn't get disheartened by man's neglect.

Man's instincts need to be awakened, and the birth of new life serves to hone these instincts. The first phase of an infant's life is as tender and beautiful as the eastern sky at dawn. Maybe this fact will inspire Man to turn his attention to Nature — the life force of all that is alive —. It is this hope that spurs Nature to constantly rejuvenate itself and present the Dance of Life to attract Man. How patient Nature is! How deep is its faith that one day man will respond to its call! And on that day man will shake away all considerations of truth

of wealth and intellect and step forward to be one with Nature.

It is only then that flowers will bloom in the desert in men's hearts, flowers more beautiful than any that have bloomed before; songs will spring to his lips, more melodious than any that have been sung before — of this there is certain.

Man rebels against Nature, today. But Nature is not ruffled by this rebellion. It knows that moisture laden clouds do the same, but don't they dissolve into rain in *Sravan*? They jostle against each other creating flashes of lightning, which, like sharp diamonds, tear them apart showering drops that frolic on the muddy earth.

Man's stony heart will melt one day and only then will we see a new heaven on earth. Till then, we shall have to listen to Nature's plaintive lament.

SAARE JAHAN SE ACCHAA

'Is this your first visit to this country?' I asked her.

'It's my first trip to Goa, but it's the eighth time I'm coming to India', she said.

She was a Japanese girl, a student of Sanskrit, about twenty six or twenty seven years of age. She'd come to see Goa and was staying with us for a week. She'd get up at daybreak and armed with a camera, a tape recorder and a pair of binoculars, she'd set off for the hillocks behind our house. She'd watch birds, take photographs and record their calls till about noon. After breakfast she'd set off for the Betaal shrine which was some distance away. She'd stop all those who passed by the track – Gawdi men in their quaint attire, sellers of firewood, old men and women with wrinkled faces – and request permission to photograph them. There's no telling how many photographs she must have clicked in those seven days. Photographs of people, of birds and trees, of temples and churches and of the beach.

'Don't you want to visit the rest of the world? Why do you keep returning to this country?' I asked her.

'There's so much diversity here, so many different things to see, I don't think it's like that anywhere else. I have fallen in love with this country,' she said.

Indeed this country has range upon range of snow-capped mountains as well as an ocean that is full to the brim with the water from its great rivers. It has tracts of barren sandy deserts as well as extensive forests. It has rivers like the Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Krishna and Kaveri as well as scenic waterfalls like the Jog, the Bhedaghat, the Sahasradham and the Doodhsagar. It has a wide range of flora and fauna and the people who live here also reveal a range of racial characteristics. Some are like the Europeans, with light hair and light eyes, while others are dark-skinned with Negroid features like curly hair and thick lips. The whole range of complexions between these two extremes can also be seen in this land.

The range and diversity one sees in this country can only be matched by the diversity in Nature, and as in the natural world, there is a unifying force that holds everything together. This is a unique land. As Rabindranath Tagore says -- Who knows whose call they responded to, who knows which corner of the earth they hailed from, these men of diverse race and faith who flocked to this country from the beginning of Time? They brought with them physical characteristics typical of their race; they came with their distinct rituals and traditions, their varied faiths and diverse tongues. This land was extensive and fertile and full of natural wealth, 'Come here, make this your home', it seemed to say, and all those who came heeded the call. They were here to stay.

When people of such diverse cultures settle down in close proximity there must have been considerable friction in their ranks. The stronger races must have tried to annihilate the weaker ones (like the Europeans did in America), and the '*Sarpasatra*' in the *Mahabharata* talks of such an incident. Some stronger races must have tried to suppress and gain control over weaker ones (like the Europeans did in South Africa), and practices of untouchability must have developed as a result.

But there is a life-spirit in this land that does not allow people to fight for too long. This life-spirit must have said to the warring factions -- History has not drawn men from different races to this land so that they can annihilate or subjugate each other. When the Creator surveyed the handiwork after setting up different races in their own, individual habitat, he decided to create one 'model' region in which all this diverse humanity would feel at home, a common nest for all races, as it were. So he chose this land and drew us here to settle down in close proximity and now he wants our support. Find a way to live together, nurture your individual characteristics, yet bound by a concern for the common good, the life-spirit said.

When the people of these diverse races settled in this land, they accepted their motherland, and heeded its call. It did not become the territory owned by any one race or creed but gave birth to a multiracial society. This is not a country of Aryans or Dravidians or indigenous tribes, but is made up of all the races that came here and made it their home. This is not merely the home of religious traditions that developed on this soil, but also of the various faiths that were brought here by the settlers; it is a multi-religious country, home to Hindus and Buddhists, Sikhs and Parsis, Muslims, Christians and Jews. It is a multilingual country, home to different languages too. No person who lives here needs to forsake his language, customs or religious traditions, for they have all been absorbed into the common national identity; today these traditions are 'ours'.

This is a land of great contrasts and diversity, no wonder that Japanese was so enamoured by what she saw. But I was born here, I grew up in this land, I've travelled widely here, yet I'm intoxicated by these sights. I see something new and I feel it is a rare sight, I see something I have never seen before, yet it seems new to me. I have travelled widely in this country, and I am never tired or bored. One must have committed good acts in a previous life to be born in this land, someone once said. I thought it was a strange statement at that time, but today I find nothing strange. There is much that is bad and evil and worthless in this society, I know, but there is no better place on earth. Truly this land is unique!

Which is why I've begun to worry, these days. There were other nations as unique as our's in the past. Take Greece, for example. It had a culture as old and as unique, it had nurtured great men like Socrates and Plato and Aristotle; the Parthenon testifies to a flourishing tradition of art and architecture, but where is all this now? You can locate it on a map and tour the country too, but you will see that it is like any other country in Europe. It has lost all characteristics that made it unique. The Greece of Socrates has vanished. Why is this so? In the effort to become a 'modern' nation, the unique features of that civilisation came to be regarded as embarrassing warts, the distinctive characteristics that marked their culture became hindrances to progress. This is the only answer that comes to mind.

Our country seems to be taking the same route these days. Our unique features are being seen as defects, our distinctive characteristics seem like embarrassing warts. In the quest for progress and parity with other nations, everything that is distinctive and unique is sought to be removed. There is much that should be lopped off or swept away or even wrenched out from the roots in the field of Indian culture and tradition. These fields have not been tended carefully for more than five thousand years, so weeds have sprouted here, and these must be wrenched out. There are patriots who fear that the seedlings will be uprooted with the weeds so they let no one hoe the fields, and the weeds continue to grow. There are reformers who, in their frenzy, uproot weeds and seedlings, and toss them out. We must be able

to distinguish seedlings from worthless weeds if we do not want to meet the fate of the ancient civilisations of Greece and Rome, Babylon and Egypt.

Our country cannot develop until we accept that everything modern is not necessarily good and worth adopting, just as everything traditional is not outdated and in need of change. We must not stagnate, nor should we be immersed in the past. A river that stops flowing will dry up. It must flow into the sea, yet it must maintain its own characteristics.

We must cultivate a new sense of nationality, of being 'Indian'. In this new scheme of things, a Punjabi will represent the culture of Punjab, a Bengali the culture of Bengal, yet both will be Indians foremost. In this new India a Hindu will be identified by his faith just as a Muslim will be, yet both will be identified as Indians first. A national identity that forces a Punjabi to forsake the culture of his region, or a Muslim to give up the trappings of his faith, is not 'Indian' in the true sense of the word.

We want our people to be united, but we don't want everyone to be the same. We've always said that we want unity but not uniformity, let us modify this statement now. We want unity, but in this unity we want diversity. Only then will our country retain its essential values and remain 'eternal'. By 'eternal' we do not mean ancient or outdated. We are talking of eternal freshness, where our today is different from our yesterday, where our tomorrow will be different again. Eternally changing, yet constant and familiar.

Such is this land of mine!

WHOSE COUNTRY IS IT, ANYWAY ?

I was going to Delhi on the Nizamuddin Express when a man introduced himself and said, he was an engineer who had come to Goa on work. 'What about you?' he asked.

I told him my name and said that I was from Goa .

'And what do you do?'

'I'm a writer.'

'I've never met a writer before. Glad to meet you, he said, shaking my hand.

It takes about forty hours to get to Delhi from Margao and the thought of speaking in English for so long didn't seem very appealing, so I asked him what his mother tongue was.

'Hindi. But we speak Punjabi at home. Punjabi isn't a language actually, it doesn't have a script ...' he explained.

'You speak Punjabi but write and read Hindi, do you?' I asked.

'No, no. We read and write in English these days. We use Hindi only to communicate with rickshaw pullers and taxi drivers ...'

'Count me as one of them, then, let's converse in Hindi. You must have heard of Amrita Pritam, haven't you?'

'Yes. She's a Punjabi writer. A famous poet.'

'So, that means, there are people who write in Punjabi. Why do you say, it is not a language, then?'

'Because it doesn't have a script.'

'What script does Amrita Pritam use?'

'Gurmukhi, the script used by the Sikhs. We are Hindus. Our Punjabi has no script,' the man said. I had nothing to say so I kept quiet about that.

The people of the Punjab, whether they are Hindus, Sikhs or Muslims speak Punjabi. When a group of Punjabi women sit together and gossip it is not possible to say which one is a Hindu or a Muslim or a Sikh by just listening to the language they use. The language of the three communities is the same, so is the folk tradition and the culture; the songs they sing at births and weddings are the same, as are the rituals and practices.

The British made the Muslims realise the need for a distinct 'Muslim identity' so the Punjabi Muslim, in a bid to separate himself from the Hindus and Sikhs, adopted Urdu as his language. Yet, even today, a Punjabi Muslim can speak Urdu without being taught the language. And even after he learns to read and write Urdu, he continues to speak Punjabi at home. Punjabi Muslims in Pakistan also speak Punjabi at home.

No matter how great the Hindus consider themselves to be, they cannot stop imitating the Muslims. The Punjabi Hindu, too, cannot speak Hindi without receiving instruction in the language. Since the Muslims have adopted Urdu as their language, the Punjabi Hindus have built up ties with Hindi which they now regard as their language. Yet, the Punjabi Hindu continues to speak Punjabi at home. Sikhs are neither Hindus nor Muslims. Their religion, which developed as part of an effort to bring the Hindu and Muslim communities together, is now a separate faith, quite distinct from the other religions. Since they were not Hindus they did not identify with the Hindi language. Urdu, too, had no attraction for them. The Sikhs adopted Punjabi as their language and developed Gurmukhi, a phonetic script like the Nagari, as their script. Long before the VIII th Schedule was adopted in the Constitution, Punjabi was recognised as an important language with a flourishing literature and many famous writers. The Jnanpith Award had also been awarded to work written in the language.

Yet, the engineer I met on the train claimed that Punjabi was not a language, that it had no script. There are educated people who continue to remain 'ignorant', not just in Goa but also in the Punjab, I realised at that moment. It is these 'ignorant educated' people who have messed up the country's affairs today.

The day after I reached Delhi, I went to meet a Punjabi writer who wrote novels and short stories. I'd known this lady for ten or twelve years but we hadn't met after my stint with the Sahitya Akademi came to an end. 'I'd like to read your work, but you write in Konkani. Send me any of your work that is available in Hindi or English,' she always said. When my book '*Gandhi in the Jangam Vidyapeeth mein*' was published in Hindi, I sent her a copy. There had been an upheaval in her life in recent times. Her husband used to abuse her, and she had tolerated this abuse for the last ten years. Finally, she couldn't take it any more and decided to move out of his house and live independently. 'Look at my face. It has been repaired through plastic surgery. The demon had disfigured me completely' she said pointing to the scars. I said I was sorry and then lapsed into silence. What could I say? I hadn't known that she was a victim of such abuse.

I read your book. I'd seen Kaka Kalelkar, your book introduced me to him. I got to know you, too. And most important, I got to know quite a bit about Gandhi. I always hated him,' she said.

'Why should you hate him?'

'Because I am a Sikh terrorist,' she replied.

'I know you are a Sikh. But why should that make you a terrorist ...?' 'The Sikhs have been left with no alternative. These wicked people have sacrificed innocent Sikh youths, entire families including little children have been completely wiped away,' she said.

She was spouting venom. I had never seen her like this before, and I felt uncomfortable. 'Do the Sikhs want to break away from India and form a separate nation?' I asked.

'What has India given us? Why should we remain a part of it?'

'That's a different issue. India has nothing to give except its poverty. Sometimes I wonder what India has given me ... then I ask myself what I have given for my country. Have I contributed in any way to solving any of the nation's problems? Or have I merely added to them?'

'Some people cannot rest without spouting philosophical nonsense ... I have become like that, too! Open your eyes and see what's happening ... then you will understand.'

She'd never spoken to me in this tone before and I was quite upset. I wanted to get up and leave. Yet I chose to speak, 'You've been very free with your words. Let me talk to you freely, now ...'

'I'm from Goa. Goa was not a part of India for four hundred and fifty years and twenty four days. No other part of India has been isolated from it for such a long time. During these four hundred and fifty one years and twenty four days, many monumental changes occurred in this country. The Moghuls came, they set up an empire, and after a span of time, their empire came to an end. The British arrived. They ruled the country. The independence movement of 1857 was part of the struggle to drive them away. Tilak arrived on

the scene, and the freedom struggle took on a new momentum as political activists burst bombs and fired pistols. Many people were hanged to death. Many were sent to prison in the Andaman islands from where they never returned. Gandhi aroused the nation with various programmes and movements and lakhs of people went to jail. Finally, the country became independent and was also divided into two. All these incidents have left a mark on your Punjab. Your people's lives have been uprooted totally and the history of the Punjab cannot be written without referring to these events. Right?

'My Goa, however, was not affected by any of this. It remained totally isolated from all this activity. Come to Goa, I shall show you churches that were built a hundred years before the Red Fort or the Taj Mahal. If a part of this country can lay a claim to being 'separate' from the rest of the nation, it is only Goa that can do so. Its history is different. This history might be tragic, it might make us hang our heads in shame but it is our history and we cannot deny that. America, which tyrannises the world today, does not have such a long history. Nor does Pakistan. And certainly not Punjab. Yet, you will not find a single person in Goa who will demand separation from the rest of India. If such a demand is raised, the person will either be beaten up or dismissed as a lunatic.' She listened to me in silence as I continued.

'I'd been to Nagaland some years ago, to an *ashram* that a friend runs at Chuchuihang. He's a Gujarati from Dahanu, but he was influenced by Kakasaheb and decided to serve the Naga people. He's been there for four decades, now. He took me around Nagaland and I was invited to speak to the Christian congregation at an American Baptist church. What could I say? I told them that I'd spent my whole life trying to preserve Goa's language and her distinct Goan identity. If anyone tries to dilute your separate ethnic identity, rest assured that I will also come and join your resistance, I said. But tell me, do you owe allegiance only to Nagaland? Am I merely a Goan? Who does this country belong to? Only to those who live in UP and Bihar? This is our country just as much as it is their's. I have always been guided by the vision that someone from amongst you can become the Prime Minister, someone from amongst us can become the President of this nation. If those of us who belong to the smaller communities are not inspired by such magnificent visions, we shall remain small and inconsequential, and one day we will not matter any more. Do not let the nation be taken over by those from UP and Bihar. Take the responsibility of steering its fortunes into your own hands ...' I said all this to the Naga people. I say the same to you, now. Let some Sardarji become the Prime Minister of this country ... may he be as popular as Jawaharlal. Bhagat Singh was our hero in an earlier age. May there be another such hero, today. Don't you feel that a Goan should become President some day? These are the dreams that should be fostered in the hearts of your terrorist companions in Punjab ...'

She had no answer to all this, and was slightly confused. 'Travel

d Punjab, and talk to people about all this. See what they say ...' she

come with me. Introduce me to your companions. I'll try and tackle
great task with your help ... **right now ...today.**'

Two days passed in regret.

Those who were acutely aware that our national growth was stunted
because we were not free, were the ones who worked hardest for our
independence. They fought hard and got us our freedom. None of them are
here today. They gave us our freedom and went away. 'The path to
freedom is clear and free, develop the future as you think fit. It is in your
hands, now', they said.

What progress are we talking about? Economic? Yes. But not merely
economic, for we were not an impoverished nation before independence. We
were famous all over the world because of our wealth. That is why the British
came here, why would they have come to a poor country? In that case, how did
a wealthy nation like our's become a slave? Because we did not value our
freedom? Because we fought amongst ourselves and kept each other at arm's
length.

The British identified our weak spots. Hindus and Muslims do not get along,
there must be made to fight each other. Hindus and Dalits have their differences.
Hindu will not let a Dalit's shadow fall upon his body ...so the Dalits
could be wooed. The British drew up many such programmes. They took
advantage of these divisions and drew the weaker sections closer to
themselves. **They gave them jobs in the police force and in the army, and
made them confront us.**

Who arrested the activists during the freedom struggle? Who lashed
whips on the backs of the protestors? The British? No, it was our own
people! If we had any regard for independence, things would not have
come to such a pass.

And today? We are free, but has our love for this freedom increased in
any way? Have we managed to uproot the differences that have existed in
society all these years? Our wealth has, no doubt, increased. There
were no factories in the past. Today we have factories and production has
increased manifold. Regions which did not have foot tracks are now linked
by tarred roads. There are schools and colleges in towns and villages, and
the number of educated people has increased. Dalits, who were oppressed
through the ages, have been emancipated. But our love of freedom has
not shown any marked improvement. So, all this that we have achieved
might just vanish in a trice. We need economic progress, but we must
realise that economic progress is not the ultimate goal. It must be backed
by progressive values. Have we paid attention to this aspect too?

Can any of these problems that face the nation today be called new
problems? No. They are old problems that have confronted this nation for two

thousand years. We have not solved any of them. Our vision has not changed through the years. Our minds have not changed. We rule the country with the vision and the mindset that was prevalent in the middle ages. A small mind and a limited vision cannot build a great nation. Old ideas, an outdated mindset and a constant preoccupation with the struggles of the past cannot foster a new vision.

Will the nation break apart? If we continue in this manner, the nation will certainly break apart. And one should not be surprised if some twenty to twenty five smaller states are born, and some align with China, some with America, some with Russia ...

I always stay at Kakasaheb's 'Sannidhi' when I am in Delhi. It is close to Gandhi's samadhi. I was to leave for Goa on Saturday. I went to the *samaadhi* on Friday, to pay my respects. A prayer meeting is held there every Friday. It usually lasts ten minutes. Some extraordinary emotion took hold of me during those prayers. I began to sob as I had never sobbed in my whole life.

All those who were present at the prayers stared at me.

THE SHABBY RUFFIAN

I had finished all my work in Mumbai and was in a hurry to get back to Goa. I went to the Indian Airlines office at the Fort expecting to spend forty five minutes there, but the ticket was booked in five minutes. I had asked a friend to meet me there, but it would take him some time to come. So I decided to flip through a book I had purchased recently at the Strand Book Store. I sank into a comfortable chair and flipped through some pages for five minutes or so. Suddenly it struck me that I had no right to loiter there after my work was done, and it would be better if I left the place before someone came up and asked me to. I glanced at the clock. My friend wouldn't be here for another half hour. I walked out on to the footpath and stared at the waves breaking on the shore. It was quite some time since I had a chance to gaze upon waves engaging in this cosmic dance, so I sat down on a cement bench to enjoy the scene.

My eyes were drawn to the tall buildings at Nariman Point. These tall skyscrapers were not there when I used to stay in Mumbai, I said to myself. In fact, the land on which they stand didn't even exist at that time. Billions of rupees have been spent to reclaim this land from the sea and the world's

biggest industrial houses have set up offices in that area.

Where will these industrial houses take this country?

Whenever such thoughts begin to whirl about in my mind, my hand slips into my pocket fishing for the cigarette packet that lies there. I light a cigarette and drew a couple of puffs when the shabbily dressed person seated on the platform before me walked up with his hand outstretched. 'Give me one, too,' he said. I couldn't quite make out whether it was a request or a demand, so I passed him the packet and the matchbox. 'Where do you stay, brother?' I asked.

'In Hell,' he snapped, letting forth some choice Hindi expletives. 'Thieves have moved into those buildings and are enjoying life. And we who built those structures are wallowing in this hell – this is Mumbai, brother, you!'

I kept quiet. I was a little scared of him, too. He drew out a cigarette, lit it and dragged deeply. 'I've been watching you staring at those buildings. But let me tell you, it is this that you should see...' He drew my attention to a pipeline that would carry the sewage from those buildings into the sea.

'They've brought us here to lay that pipeline, but we have no place to stay. See that woman holding her infant to her breast ...out here in public view. She wouldn't have done this back home in the village. And see that open umbrella there ... amidst those rocks? Do you know who hides behind that umbrella? A young girl, forced to defecate in the open ... what sort of life is this? Bernard Shaw was right, "To be poor is a crime!"'

'You are an educated person!' I exclaimed, quite surprised.

'Yes. Somewhat...', he smiled wryly noticing how my language had been taken on respectful overtones. 'And where are you from?'

'Goa,' I said.

'Goa? I took part in the Goan satyagraha in nineteen fifty five – I was there with Sahodara Devi. Even got beaten up by the Portuguese soldiers so that you could get your freedom.'

'In that case, you're eligible for a pension ... Do you get one?'

'No.'

'Have you applied for it?'

'A pension is for important people like you. Not for worthless chap like us ...,' the man said.

'I'm made to feel worthless myself, who'll spare a thought for you?' I said to myself as I asked him how far he had studied.

'Up to the Intermediate class,' he said.

He was born into a poor family in a small village near Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh. His father passed away in an accident when he was only ten years

His family consisted of his mother and two young sisters. His mother could not afford to put him through school so that he could make something of himself. He went to Bhopal in search of a job, but though he tried very hard, he was unsuccessful. What is the point in such an education, he thought as he became increasingly depressed, and thoughts of committing suicide crossed his mind. It was around that time that he heard of the Indian freedom movement and joined Sahodara Devi as she crossed the border into Goa. He had hoped to die in action but though Sahodara Devi sustained bullet injuries in her arms, he was merely beaten up by the soldiers and sent away. He then moved to Mumbai, for he had heard that anyone who came to the city to try and make a fortune was rarely disappointed.

'But I was unlucky. I couldn't get a job,' he said. He sat on the pavement outside the Dadar Portuguese church and polished shoes. Those who work and live on the pavements are drawn together into a family of sorts, and he developed close ties with someone in the group. This man worked in a Mill in Parel, and soon he got a job there, too. The man soon brought his wife to Mumbai and they moved into a slum behind the Buddha temple in Worli. He took him along to stay with them and both men worked in the Mill for several months. Suddenly the workers in the Mill went on strike. The strike continued, and they were on the verge of starvation when suddenly, they met a builder who inducted them into construction work '...And this has been continuing ever since ... See those buildings there? I've been involved in their construction too. One day I got into a lift to go to the tenth floor and the lift attendant abused me and threw me out. Go use those stairs,' he said, 'the lift was only for the *'sahibs'*, not for us. The bastard! An ordinary man like us, but takes on airs like the *sahibs* he ferries up and down in a lift! Mumbai does this to you. I've been here for thirty years now. I don't know what has happened to my mother or sisters. When I got here, I came to say that I'd earn some money and bring them over, but I stopped coming after that. What could I write? Actually nothing waits for anyone in this world. They must be all right, I say to myself, as I get on with life.'

On August 15 India got Independence but we turned into a nation of slaves... slave to the contractors and builders, purchasing officers, sleeping partners and Ministers ... This country belongs to them, not to us. Mumbai has a crore of people, but the sun rises only for a lakh or so. The rest of us live in darkness. There is no place for us in this country of yours. If some man is shot or murdered, your papers carry investigative reports, who committed it, why he did it and all that. The other day a hundred and twenty homeless people lost their lives in Belapur in Thane but there was not a word in the papers. No one is bothered whether we are alive or dead. Sometimes I get so enraged, I want to become a Naxalite, get a few bombs and destroy these buildings. The government acts on your behalf. The government has done anything for us. If we had got decent jobs in our own country, why would we come to live in this hell? Worthless bastards, each

and every one of them! Sing the national anthem and make merry while we starve to death. Where is the Independence and the Socialism they are talking about?’

The man demanded another cigarette. ‘You are the first Goan I have met after the satyagraha. I felt comfortable with you right from the start when you addressed me as ‘brother’. You think I’m very bitter, don’t you? But what can I do? I wasn’t like this in the old days ... life has made me bitter,’ he said.

It was as though the subject matter of a whole novel was unfolding right before me. I remained silent as he spoke of an incident when he was working in the Mill and staying in his friend’s shack in Worli.

‘My friend’s wife was about two years older than me, and she treated me very affectionately. I addressed her as ‘*bhabhi*’, and she looked on me as her ‘*devar ji*’. She was like a goddess, I saw my mother and two sisters in her. This was about a month and a half after we started working at the Mill, a few days before the strike ... My friend and I worked on different shifts. He worked at night and spent the whole day at home while I worked out all day, but spent the night in the shack. One night he got drunk and when he reported for work, the foreman insulted him, and sent him home. When he got to the shack, he saw us talking and laughing, and suspected that we were having an affair. He lost control of his senses and lashed out at his wife with a stout stick cursing her in vile terms. I was so enraged that I slapped him hard for insulting the poor woman whom I revered as my sister-in-law. This brought him to his senses, but I moved out from the shack in Worli and I’ve been staying in Dharavi ever since. I go and meet her sometimes, but I don’t even drink a glass of water in their home.’

He would have talked a lot more, but one of his companions came along and drew him away. I left soon after as my friend arrived. It must be a year, now, since I met this man. One tends to forget such things after a couple of months, but that shabby character remains in my thoughts. He appears before me each time I light a cigarette. So I toyed with the idea of writing a story about him, but better sense prevailed. The short story and the novel are not forms that I am comfortable with, why should I give people a chance to laugh at me?

The other evening while I was reading the Finance minister’s budget speech in the papers, that shabby ruffian suddenly appeared before me yet again, ‘Has the minister allocated any funds for me in his budget?’ he asked.

I was momentarily confused. ‘He’s tossed a few bones before everyone but the general direction is the same that Manmohan Singh had charted out ...,’ I said, and the figure vanished leaving behind a stream of expletives. I knew that it was my imagination at play, but I sat there waiting for him to reappear, so vibrant and real did he seem.

That night I dreamt that I was at the Indian Airlines booking counter again. I finish my work and move outside to a bench on the Marine Drive from where I can gaze on the waves. Suddenly the ruffian on the bench in front of me walks up and demands a cigarette, 'Remember me?' he asks.

'Yes, of course! I can't forget you,' I say as he flops down beside me on the bench. I prepare to listen to the rest of his story, but he begins to tell me instead.

'Ask them who they have formulated these budgets for, don't people like us have any place in this country? I am educated, but why is it that I am unemployed? Why did they give me such an education that is useless in my village, yet is unable to get me a job in the city? If I could make a living in my village would I have come to Mumbai to stay in this hell called Dharavi? I might have come to Mumbai to acquire a name and fame, but not to earn a living. When will your Budgetary Plans ensure that a man can be employed in his own village? There are thirty to thirty five lakh homeless people like me who live in shacks in Mumbai's slums. We are human beings like the rest of you, don't you need to address our concerns? Imagine how many people must be staying in slums in other cities like Kolkata, Chennai, Delhi ...!

'Why do these slums develop in the first place, don't you realise you people are making a mistake? The free trade and economy you have set up will result in buildings on Nariman Point, on the one hand, and slums in Dharavi, on the other. Such an economy will not survive. You people have come away so far because there are people in this country who just sit there and cry about their fate. But things will not remain like this always. The country will awaken one day, and your peace will be shattered. No matter how much money you allocate in the defence budget, so long as you encourage an economy that gives rise to a Nariman Point and a Dharavi in close proximity – the country cannot be safe. There is no need for an enemy to attack the country's frontiers. Your skewed economic policy will destroy the country from within.

'One day all of us will turn into Naxalites, and do you know who will be talking about this change? The same forces who fund your free economy today. These same forces will supply firearms and guns and bombs to the poor and downtrodden and instigate them to rebel ... When will you recognise these forces?' he asks.

I listen in silence. Suddenly he springs up with a pistol in his hand. 'I'll tell you, first. Travel in aeroplanes, do you?' He fires a volley of shots.

I wake up with a scream.

AN ANTHEM FOR THE WORLD

Portugal, today, is not the same country that we were agitating against. It has liberated all its colonies. Salazar has been erased from public memory. Portugal, today, is a new country altogether.

Yet its national anthem '*Heroes do mar*' remains the same and the colonial aspirations voiced in this song do not reflect well on Portugal today.

Great Britain has also changed over the years, and the empire over which the sun never sets, doesn't exist today. Most of the colonies have escaped from Britain's grasp and it is a new Britain that one encounters today. Yet they continue with 'God save the King' as their national anthem and call upon God to scatter Britain's enemies, confound their politics and frustrate their knavish tricks.

In India we have two national songs. The first, 'Vande Mataram' is outdated today and remains a mere paean of praise. During the freedom struggle, however, thousands of people faced attacks with sticks and clubs and stood up to verbal abuse with this song on their lips. Many freedom fighters were hanged to death. The story of their sacrifice and martyrdom

is embedded in this song, so we have retained it as a national anthem.

The second, 'Jana gana mana' was not accepted merely because it was written by Rabindranath, but because the leading activist of the freedom movement, Subhash babu, accepted it as the anthem of the 'Free India League' in Germany and of the 'Azad Hind Fauj' in south east Asia at a later stage. We have retained the salutation 'Jai Hind' and the anthem 'Jana gana mana' as a mark of respect to Subhash babu. But we must retain the whole song.

India, as it exists today, needs more anthems but these should be anthems that the whole world can relate to. It is a different world that we live in today, more unified and with common ideals, so this world anthem should reflect this new 'mission'. Rabindranath's '*Where the mind is without fear*' is one such song reflecting these noble ideals.

'Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;

Where knowledge is free;

Where the world had not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;

Where words come out from the depth of truth;

Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;

Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert to sand of dead habit;

Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and action--

Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.'

Rabindranath was not hailed as a world poet without reason. He was a citizen of the world. Let us adopt this anthem in our country, first. Later we can request other countries, through the medium of the United Nations, to adopt it as a world anthem, too.

17

THE DEATH RATTLE IN DELHI'S THROAT

It's been four years since I visited Delhi. I made various excuses and missed seven meetings scheduled in that city. The eighth one will be held next month. I have written to the authorities saying that I am unable to attend, and, I would like them to select someone else to take my place in the committee

Godubai read the letter, 'Are you breaking all ties with Delhi?' she asked.

'Our scriptures state that one must not gaze upon the setting sun which dazzled the world all day,' I said. 'Delhi has achieved renown as the capital of the country through many centuries. Now the rattle of death echoes in her ear ... I cannot bear to watch her decline.'

When I first set foot in Delhi, I did not have an establishment of my own and was staying in a friend's house. Like the other Goans of that time, he considered himself a Maharashtrian, and was well entrenched in the Maharashtrian society residing in Delhi. It was Bheemrao and Kaka Gadgil had invited the hundred and fifty Marathi speaking people living in Delhi to his home. When I went to the function

along with my friend, my attention was drawn to two personalities, Dr. Baba Saheb Ambedkar and Shankar Rao Dev.

Gadgil welcomed his guests and then invited Dr. Ambedkar to address the gathering, but when he declined, Shankar Rao Dev began to speak. 'Delhi bears the remains of nine dynasties, this is a vast burial ground, often feel that independent India should not have a burial ground for its capital ... that the capital should be shifted to some place in Maharashtra but ...'

Shankar Rao Dev stopped for a while, and his tone became serious. 'Delhi today is no longer the capital of any one dynasty, it is the capital of a nation of people. After many centuries, the common people of this land have power in their hands. Every single voter has a share in this power, he is like a king. We have the opportunity to write a new chapter in Delhi's history, and in the history of this country. Let us all work together to make this country great. We have had an illustrious past, let us take an oath that we shall make the future even brighter ...'

Shankar Rao was short and unimpressive, yet, in my eyes he grew in stature at that moment and seemed to touch the sky.

Delhi was such a beautiful city in those days. It was laid out in perfect proportions with the Connaught Circus in the centre of the city, and various roads radiating like sun rays from this central orb. Small bungalows stood on either side of these roads with beautiful gardens in front and at the back. Tall trees stood along the boundary walls, and there were grassy lawns and flower beds within. People passed each other on the roads, but there was no rancour amongst them. The climate was salubrious and dry, so one didn't suffer from a stuffy nose or a persistent cough. Most Goans complained about the summer heat and the cold in winter, but I enjoyed both these seasons in Delhi.

I've lost count of the number of times I've visited Delhi, and I believe the city remained unchanged for fifteen years or so. People kept saying that the city had changed in character, it was falling prey to the influence of Punjabis, but I didn't notice any of that because I liked Punjabis with their carefree attitude to life, their love of dance and good food.

We achieved Independence, and the country was divided into two parts. Punjab was torn apart, and the more productive areas fell to Pakistan. A lot of the fun-loving Punjabi vanished as the people of the region fell upon Muslims and bayed for their blood. Delhi has seen Punjabis of both types. The city opened its arms and welcomed droves of displaced Punjabi families, and they make up the majority in Delhi today. Those who were accustomed to a Delhi steeped in Islamic culture complained that the city had changed. Yet Delhi remained as beautiful as in the past.

Delhi's glory remained as long as Jawaharlal was alive, after that time

age became obvious to my eyes. The small bungalows were replaced by skyscrapers and the commotion on the roads increased. The 'Hindustani' culture as well as the 'Punjabi' culture of the past was replaced by a conglomerate culture and Hindustani, Punjabi and other regional languages lost out to the quaint mixture of Hindi and English which some call 'Hinglish'.

Men of little stature occupied positions of power, and the inconceivable continued – dynastic rule came to be perpetuated in this seat of democracy, the capital of free India – that too, by members of the family of Jawaharlal, the most foremost of all democrats!

'Who can take charge of this country but the members of this family?' the largest political party, the Congress, asked. The value of the rupee declined and so did all our other values, including our worth as a nation. Only those who could inspire fear or create immense profit for the men in power can get their work done in Delhi, people said. Men with no moral scruples occupied the best positions in the land. One of them said that he would gladly sweep the floor if Indira ji commanded him to do so, and he became the Home Minister, and at a later stage, the President of this country. Our sages declared that these men remain beggars in a kingdom ruled by a foolish king. To give credence to this saying perhaps, many of the greatest journalists, writers, artists and freedom fighters queued up before these rulers for the crumbs of favour that were occasionally doled out to them.

I will not set foot in Delhi again, I vowed as I turned away.

Yet, there were occasions when I was forced to visit that city again. I made sure that these were short trips, quite unlike the ten or fifteen days that I used to spend in Delhi in the past. In the old days I would visit the book stalls to check out on what was new, but today book prices have risen beyond my grasp so I only gaze at books. I visit a couple of dear friends and leave the city; I have never been so unsocial in my life.

I returned from my last trip to Delhi burdened with a nagging cough that stayed with me for two weeks. 'You smoke too much, that's why you cough,' people said, but when I read that the Australian cricket team had refused to play in Delhi because it was the most polluted city in the world, I realised why I coughed.

A World Bank circular states that seven thousand five hundred people die in Delhi every year because of diseases arising from the pollution in the air. Seven thousand five hundred deaths a year ... or twenty deaths in a day ... so I could feature in those twenty people, I thought as my heart thudded in fear.

Who is responsible for the air pollution in Delhi? The factories in the vicinity? They can be moved to other places. But how can one control the buses and cars, the trucks and tankers that spew poisonous fumes into the atmosphere? There was such a hue and cry when dengue fever caused the death of three hundred people some time ago. But no one writes about

the twenty people who die every day because of the pollution in the air, is as though everyone conspires to maintain silence on this issue. When someone dies of a heart attack or of asthma, it appears in the papers, but no one mentions deaths caused by the pollution in the air. A survey of ten thousand school children in Delhi showed that one sixth suffered from asthma. It might be possible to reduce the number of cars and buses, trucks and tankers that ply on Delhi's roads but what does one do about the scooters and autorickshaws that the majority of the population use, making the air in the city so polluted?

Delhi today retains very little of its past glory, and it is evident that the death rattle has begun to sound in the city's throat. This is best seen in the political life of the city – never, during the five thousand years of its existence has it been ruled by such a motley group of dwarfs, as it is today. Delhi has been ruled by wicked men, by crafty conspirators, by wild schemers in the past. But it has never been governed by men of such little vigour, by such an impotent set of people as it is, now.

Who was Sanjay Gandhi? The Prime Minister of the country? The President? Or the Father of the Nation? Why was he cremated at the Shantivan? Is the Shantivan a private cremation ground for members of the Nehru family? If it is a memorial for the first Prime Minister of independent India, a towering personality in his own right, Sanjay Gandhi should have no place at that spot. Nor should Indira ji or Rajiv Gandhi. But those in power in Delhi do not raise these issues in the Lok Sabha. Nor do those who sit in the Opposition. When the Prime Minister and the President lay wreaths at the memorial to Sanjay Gandhi, no one stops to question what his contribution to the country has been.

Delhi bears the graves of nine dynasties. And now memorials to members of the tenth one, the Nehru dynasty, have begun to appear there.

The death rattle has begun to sound in Delhi's throat. I do not choose to visit it any more.

18

IN RASHTRAPATI BHAVAN

I had visited the Moghul Gardens three times but had merely seen Rashtrapati Bhavan from the outside, till Yashpal Jain took me into the Ashok Hall one day. One of his books was to be released by the President at a special ceremony, and it was there that I ran into an old friend from my school days at the Gandhi Memorial Museum. I'd returned to Goa after that, but my friend had joined the government and worked his way up till he became a member of the staff at the Rashtrapati Bhavan. When the book launch ceremony was over, he took me to his home.

'I've only seen the Ashok Hall on T.V., never been inside' I said as we were driving to his house.

'But that wasn't the Ashok Hall. That's only used when ministers are in session, or when foreign diplomats present their credentials, or when the Head of State arrives to meet the President. This was another hall,' he said.

'I saw the chandeliers and the portraits on the wall ...'

'Most people make that mistake,' my friend explained.

'We were meeting after many years, and the conversation flowed freely.

'I'm so happy that I could see the interiors of that building, but I must confess that I was feeling gauche and awkward ... wonder how Rajen babu lived amidst all that grandeur!' I exclaimed.

'Neelam Sanjeev Reddy also felt overawed by those surroundings at first. Give me a small bungalow, I don't want this imposing edifice, he used to say. Then he got used to this pomp and style and forgot what he used to say. Perhaps it was the same with Rajen babu,' my friend remarked.

'How long have you been working here?' I asked.

'Since Dr. Radhakrishnan's time. In those days Rashtrapati Bhavan was a grandeur that was distinct. Radhakrishnan was a scholar who was always surrounded by books. New books arrived all the time. He was truly a 'philosopher king'. Great scholars from all over the world came to meet him, and the prestige of Rashtrapati Bhavan was enhanced by their presence. He always drafted his own speeches, he'd never read something that another had written out for him. Sometimes he'd speak extemporaneously. This glory continued through Dr. Zakir Husain's tenure. After that it waned and has never been seen, since. With the devaluation of the rupee, Indira ji managed to devalue all established institutions in the country, even the post of President. During the Emergency, when she summoned President Fakruddin Ali Ahmed at midnight to affix his signature to some of his dictates, the post of the President lost its power.

'Yet, there was no reduction in the pomp and splendour associated with this ceremonial post. It continues in the same way that it did when the Viceroy used to live here. The government sets aside twenty crore rupees every year for maintaining this pomp and splendour. Some three hundred government employees work here (or do no work at all, as some might say). There are three hundred officials involved in security operations, some forty wardens, a hundred and fifty presidential bodyguards, as well as three hundred gardeners and just as many miscellaneous workers on the rolls.

'There are thirty seven sitting rooms and a large banquet hall. You can see massive chandeliers here, and the walls are covered with original masterpieces by the greatest artists and painters from all over the world. There are two theatres with a capacity of five hundred people each. More than eight thousand items of clothing are washed in the laundry every day.

'Some three hundred and fifty people work in the banquet halls, and this includes the *khansamas* or chefs and butlers as well. Two attendants or *hajuriyas* stand in every doorway. All they do is to open and shut doors and bow respectfully when someone passes by.

'There are three hundred and forty rooms, a golf course and five tennis courts. There are two hundred attendants with over a hundred and fifty sweepers on the rolls.

'There are fifteen cars in the garage, of which not a single one has

manufactured in the country. There is a Rolls Royce, a Chevrolet, a Cadillac Mercedes Benz with six doors which is used only once a year on Republic

There are a dozen Polish horses which draw the President's buggy on national occasions. Besides these, there are a hundred and thirty horses of different breeds.'

When I listened to these stories I began to wonder whether we were talking about the President's house in our country or the White House where the President of the United States stays. The United States is a wealthy nation, and if they choose to spend so much on maintaining the grandeur of their presidency, it is understandable enough. But in a country where fifty out of a hundred people do not get one square meal a day, where fifty out of a hundred women don't have enough clothes to wear, is it necessary for the Government to spend twenty crore rupees on maintaining the grandeur of this institution?

When the Portuguese empire was in its heyday, a grand palace was built for the President, and Carmona, Craveiro Lopes were some of the personalities who stayed there. When Portugal divested itself of its colonies, Amaro Soares became the President of the country. He used the President's palace only to receive foreign dignitaries or to accept the credentials of foreign diplomats. He continued to live in his own, modest home.

The President of India should also reside in a more modest establishment, not because our's is an impoverished country, nor because of the legacy of Mahatma and Gandhi. A nation that is civilised, and boasts of such great traditions as our's, should not have to depend on external pomp and show. When the Viceroy lived in this imposing building, he was not a mere ceremonial head of state but was involved in the administration of the entire country. The President has no such responsibilities today. It is not surprising, therefore, that he continues to live amidst such pomp and splendour as the Viceroy did.

It is said that whoever stays in Delhi for a length of time takes on the attributes of an 'emperor' or a 'Lord'. It is imperative that the country rid itself of this white elephant as soon as possible.

STATUES

I don't know why this happens, but my mind is filled with sadness when I see a statue. The memory of a man who has passed away should not be evoked in this manner, I feel.

There is a statue of Sir Pherozeshah Mehta in front of the Municipal Corporation in Mumbai, a truly remarkable specimen in its field. Sir Pherozeshah was a towering personality in his day. His temperament was that of a radical. His politics reflected this swashbuckling trait, with many of the leading social activists of the day coming under his sway. He left a huge void in Mumbai's public life when he passed away, and this grand statue was commissioned in tribute to his memory.

Whenever I pass that region, I stand on the opposite pavement and wonder myself if that statue has helped fill the void in Mumbai's public life. How many people know his name today? Thousands of people, maybe lakhs of people, rush past that statue every day. Do any of them pause to look at it and wonder who the personality could be? Sir Pherozeshah has been swept away by the tide of Time. No one remembers him any more.

It is a mistake to think that statues keep a man's memory alive. Sir

Pherozezshah might be remembered by a few students of history, but the world would have remembered him even if this statue didn't exist.

If we move down Hornby road past the Fountain and the Mumbai University building, we reach a square with a magnificent statue of a man on horseback. This is Edward VII, one of the monarchs of the British empire of which it was said, 'the sun never sets'. Who knows why the British placed this statue here, perhaps they wanted to show that they controlled Mumbai and its people. Whenever I pass that spot in a taxi, I ask the driver who the character is, and the answer, without fail is, 'Don't know, sir, but we call it "Kala ghoda" or "black horse".' Such a mighty emperor, yet, in the mind of Mumbai's taxi drivers he remains merely a man on a black horse!

There's a grand statue of a Parsi gentleman near Crawford market. He must have been a notable figure but the general public refers to him as 'standing Parsi'!

There's a life-sized statue of Lokmanya at Chowpati in Mumbai. Lokmanya was revered as a god during the national movement, and when he passed away in Mumbai, it was as though the heavens had collapsed on the nationalists. When someone, no matter how eminent a personality might be, passes away in Mumbai, his body is cremated at the Chhandanwadi crematorium. However, an exception was made in the case of Lokmanya and his last rites were performed at Chowpati. A life-sized statue was placed up at the spot so that 'future generations might revere his memory'. When I arrived in Mumbai forty or forty five years ago, this imposing statue would draw one's attention from afar. But today? Trees and bushes shroud the statue, no one gives it a second glance, and Mumbai's youth who flock to that spot to gorge on *bhelpuri*, cannot be bothered about the statue that stands there.

When Lokmanya is treated in this fashion in Mumbai, one can imagine the fate of Mahadev Govind Ranade and Gopal Krishna Gokhale, whose statues are almost hidden by shrubs on the stretch between the Fountain and Churchgate station. In the old days no one dared light a beedi or cigarette in their presence; one feels sorry for these two stalwarts who have to witness the scenes of moral degradation that unfold in that area after dark.

It is a fallacy to believe that we are perpetuating the memory of those who have passed away by erecting their statues. It is a bigger fallacy to think that we can erase the legacy of great men by removing the statues that have already been installed.

There was a very artistic statue of Luis de Camões in Old Goa. Some of the pseudo nationalists amongst us decided that this poet, who spoke so highly of the Portuguese empire, did not deserve to stand on Goan soil so they had the statue removed. This was meant as a retaliatory gesture. Whether it hurt the Portuguese empire, one cannot tell, but I must con-

Ravindra Kelekar was extremely upset. He felt that Goa was insulting poets of the world by this act, and dashed off four or five articles bemoaning the position Camões occupied in world literature. But would anyone listen to him? These pseudo nationalists and freedom fighters listen only to those who fling crumbs of favour and position before them, not to voices that try to make them think.

There is a force called Fate or Destiny that operates in this world, and sometimes this force takes revenge on us for the crimes that we commit. Some time after this statue was pulled down in Old Goa, the President of India, on a state visit to Portugal, laid a wreath at the grave of Camões. I feel these pseudo nationalists should have demanded that the President resign for lack of tact. Or they should have ended their lives in the Mandovi as a mark of protest.

There was a time when statues of the Buddha could be seen all over India. Some of these statues were of gigantic proportions as Buddhism ruled the country in its sway for almost two thousand years. One day Mao took control of the country, and the first thing he did was to remove these statues from public spaces and to consign them to various museums. Mao believed that Buddhism was the religion of the dynastic rulers who kept ignorant masses under their control, and Buddha was their emblem. He removed all traces of the Buddha from public life and confiscated books on Buddhism. But the Chinese masses, like Indians, are worshippers of images and need some image to venerate. So the new leaders catered to the hunger in the people, they erected statues of Mao all over the country, and compiled pithy statements from his speeches into a 'Red Book' which had a place in every man's life.

When I visited China, however, I didn't see a single statue of Mao except for the one before the People's Hall in Beijing. Those statues have all been relegated to museums, like the statues of Buddha were in earlier times, I was told. I couldn't get a copy of the 'Red Book' either, not even in the Chinese language. It is as though the new establishment in China has decided to wipe away all traces of Mao from their lives.

The Russians seem to be following the same track. Stalin was the most powerful Communist leader of his time and was regarded with awe by Communists all over the world. When he passed away, his protégé Krushchev came to power, but Krushchev chose to wipe away all traces of his mentor from public life, and today one doesn't even see any portraits of Stalin in public places. Stalin had written reams of political literature, but one can hardly find any of this today. He doesn't find a place in the history of Communist Russia, and it is quite possible that youngsters in the country are unaware of his name, so completely has he been obliterated from the nation's life. Communism itself has disappeared from Russia today. If the statue of Lenin can be destroyed, it is doubtful that Marx or Engels will survive in

public memory.

I must narrate an amusing incident, in this connection:

I managed to locate a Hindi edition of Mao's 'Red Book', which eluded me in China, at a friend's place in Bandoda, a little village in So, what does this mean? They managed to eradicate this philosophy in China and Russia, but there is a vast world outside these countries, where traces of these philosophies may still be found. History cannot be wiped away.

We have erected statues of Shivaji, Ambedkar and Gandhi all over the country. There is no need for so many statues. In fact there is no need to have any statue of Gandhi at all. People who are sure to be forgotten after death can have a statue to mark them out in public memory. But one who continues to inspire people after death is eternal, I believe. Gandhi was a messiah, like Buddha and Jesus, his memory will never fade away. The country does not need a single statue of Gandhi. Who knows what political equations will come about in future, who knows when they will decide to tear these statues down? Before such a thing comes to pass, I feel that we, his ardent followers, should dismantle these statues ourselves.

CORRUPTION

It was the month of January. I had dropped in on a friend who was a big business man. We spoke for some time, had tea, and as I got up to go, he gave me a diary and a key chain.

I had use for the diary as I've been making jottings every day for many years now. Some of my friends send me a diary every year without fail, so I'm generally all set with a fresh diary even before the new year begins. If I have no qualms about asking people to give me one. So I accepted the diary and slipped it into my bag, but I had no use for the key chain. 'I'll take the diary, but this is no use to me. Give it to someone who might use it,' he said.

'Give it to your wife. She can use it,' my friend insisted.

'She doesn't possess anything that needs to be locked away. This is of no use to her, either,' I said, but he refused to listen.

I am against the use of locks and keys. I believe that it is only those who do not trust their companions, who look upon them as potential thieves, that have recourse to such things. I am not surrounded by such people. Even if I were, I wouldn't insult them by taking such a step. One who locks up his possessions

insults the people around him, I feel. But I didn't want to explain all this to my friend. He would probably say,

'Don't you shut your windows at night? Don't you latch the main door from the inside every night?'

Whenever anyone expresses a belief, people in Goa are quick to pounce on him to check whether he really practises what he states. I had no desire to subject myself to his examination, so I quietly accepted the key challenge and came away.

The human mind is a strange thing. It leaps from one thought to another without any warning. My thoughts went back to that time, eighteen or twenty years ago when Kaka Kalelkar and I were in Japan. Our host owned a hotel in Tokyo. The Japanese like to shower their guests with gifts. Our host presented us with two tiny torches that had our names embossed on them. The beam from the torch was just enough to see the time, or to make one's way to the bathroom in the middle of the night.

After three days in Tokyo we set out for Gotemba, and Kakasaheb realised that he had lost his torch. Perhaps his bag had come unfastened and the torch had fallen out somewhere. Kakasaheb was quite upset, and kept wondering where it could be. A Japanese monk who knew Hindi, was one of the members of our group. 'It must have fallen out somewhere,' he said. There was an Indian in our group, however, who believed, it must have been stolen.

When the Japanese monk heard this, he was quite agitated, 'No. There are no thieves in Japan. No one has robbed it, it must have fallen somewhere. Kakasaheb's name is inscribed on the torch. Someone will find it and send it back ... mark my words ...' he said.

I admired his pride in the moral temper of his fellowmen. But it was the same in our country, I was embarrassed to admit.

We toured Gotemba, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Kobe, and Osaka, and returned to our hotel in Tokyo after two weeks. When we checked at the counter for mail, we were handed a bundle of letters from India, as well as an envelope bearing Kakasaheb's torch! The torch had been found by some passerby who realised that the name inscribed on it was an Indian one. He contacted the Indian embassy and got the address of our hotel, and sent it back.

This gave me a new insight into the character of the Japanese people and as I reflected on what would have happened if this had occurred in India I was filled with shame.

Another fact that struck me was the absence of Inspectors or Supervisors. When a man is entrusted with a task, it is expected that he will discharge it in the best and most honest possible manner. The proprietor of the firm does not employ an Inspector to supervise the work or to check if the employee is siphoning funds set aside for the job. Faith breeds faith, and suspicion breeds suspicion.

suspicion – this is an important component of Japanese character. I don't remember where I read this story. There was a King who loved cream that formed on top of milk. He would give his servant four annas every day to buy cream for him. At the end of a month the King began to feel that the servant was bringing less cream than he used to, or, What could be happening, he wondered. Perhaps the servant was buying three annas worth of cream, and appropriating one anna every day. He hired an Inspector and set him on the job of tailing the servant. 'See if you catch the money, then come and tell me. He shall be punished,' the King ordered.

The Inspector followed the servant around for some time and realised that he was buying three annas worth of cream, and keeping one anna for himself every day. He confronted the servant with evidence. The servant fell at his feet. 'You're right my lord. I buy three annas worth of cream, and keep one anna for myself. But what can I do? The wages I receive are so meagre that I can't make ends meet. And everything is so expensive that I don't know what will happen to us?' he wailed.

The Inspector thought for a moment. 'I'll let you go since you've confessed to your crime. Otherwise I'd have hanged you to death like the others I had ordered.' Then, in a lower tone he continued, 'Tomorrow, buy three annas worth of cream. Of the two annas that you save, one is for you and one is for me. I'll tell the king that cream has become more expensive these days, after all inflation occurs all over the world ...'

People keep saying that we Indians lack moral character, that corruption is on the rise. Some people believe that the foundation for good morals and an upright character is laid in school. When we became a secular nation, these factors that were essential parts of religious training imparted in schools, were done away with. Let us assume that religious training is reintroduced in schools once again, and children receive lectures on morality and virtue. If the environment in their homes is conducive to morality, they shall benefit, no doubt. Otherwise, the lectures in school will be useless, for it is the education one receives at home that moulds a person's character. Some people say that the government should punish those who are found to be corrupt, otherwise corruption will continue to flourish. The experienced person knows, however, that the government itself functions on the principle of 'an anna for you and an anna for me', so any such measure will not succeed.

In *Asian Drama*, Gunnar Myrdal says that if the aid India received from other nations for poverty alleviation programmes had been correctly utilised, poverty would have disappeared by now. But not even ten percent is used for this purpose. The remaining ninety percent goes into the pockets of those who earn four figure salaries. We are making a mistake everywhere. If corruption could be abolished by mere criticism, it would

have vanished by now, for everyone has been criticising it for years. One can therefore conclude that it is only through living righteously that one can inspire others to lead righteous lives. In winter we bring a heater or stove into the room to banish the cold. It is only if the temperature of the heater or stove is much greater than the surrounding air that it will radiate enough warmth to make us comfortable.

When the father in a family displays strong moral character, the children will also follow in his footsteps. A nation will show strong moral character if its leaders display such qualities.

When people complain about the rampant corruption, and demand that this government should be toppled and another set up in its place, I am tempted to laugh. It is the engine of the motor car that is defective, why should the driver be changed? The men we elect to power are the 'one anna for you, one anna for me' types. Why, we fall into the same bracket, too. Let us first live morally authoritative lives, so that we can be like 'heaters' generating warmth and inspiring others to do the same. Only then will our country develop strong national character, only then will the country progress.

AKBARALLY

What should I get you from Mumbai?' I asked my two grand daughters as I prepared to set out.

Clay!' both of them replied.

Clay? What's that?"

The younger girl rushed into the house, and fetched a small lump.

What will you do with this clay?' I asked, surprised.

We'll make rats and lizards and parrots and peacocks,' she said.

I'm familiar with book shops and the Khadi Bhandar, I've never stepped into any other shop in all these years. All such responsibilities were discharged by the 'Home Department' ever since I got married, so I had no idea where toys and things were available. I made a few enquiries about where I could get clay in Mumbai, and was told to check at shops that sold toys.

I noticed a toy shop at Crawford Market, and asked for clay. Someone went inside to check, but they had run out of stock, and promised to get some the next day.

I leave for Goa tomorrow. Where can I get some right now?"

Try Akbarally's,' the man said.

And where would Akbarally's be?"

The man stared at me in surprise, but Madhav Borkar, who was accompanying me offered to show me the place. We went to the Fort, and managed to locate Akbarally's which was near the Fountain. I must confess that I was quite overwhelmed by what I saw inside – except for horses and elephants, motor cars and aeroplanes, the departmental store seemed to stock everything else. We purchased the clay, and then roamed about looking at the items on display. I picked up different articles and noted the prices. There were so many different things, and each one was so expensive. Even Kubera the Lord of wealth, would have been flummoxed by the display and would have left the store without purchasing anything!

What was most notable was the fact that all these items were manufactured in our own country! The Socrates in me came alive, 'Our country is not manufacturing so many things that most of us will never use,' I remarked.

'What strikes me more is the fact that such things are being bought at all. Imagine ...people in Mumbai are able to buy such expensive stuff ...!' Madhav remarked. He left me at the bus stop, and I boarded a bus to Bandra. The trip took about an hour, and my thoughts began to race with the vehicle.

People say that the moral values in our country have been lowered. Do stores like Akbarally's have a role to play in this, I wondered. Why are so many luxury goods being produced here? To satisfy people's basic needs? Or to create new needs and desires? What is the 'motive' behind such production? As Man's wants and desires multiply, his life becomes confused and complex. He becomes weak as he wallows in luxury, and becomes a slave to these very desires. The luxuries and conveniences we adopt to make our lives more comfortable become our masters with the passage of time and our view of life as well as pattern of behavior is transformed.

The ability to remain unaffected by one's surroundings, a refusal to bow down before anyone, the ability to remain independent and to never consider oneself helpless – these are the characteristics of a robust personality, and it is this robustness that forms the backbone of moral character. When the robustness of character is whittled away, what are we left with?

When people are steeped in comfort and luxury, the society that develops is termed 'consumerist.' All distinctions tend to get erased, and only two categories of people remain – one, the people who sell, and two, the ones that buy. Everything in this society is ranked according to its saleability and one's purchasing power, hence all aspects of life are marked in monetary terms. Physical labour has a price, it can be bought or sold. Man's intellectual properties come at a price, they can be bought or sold. Even sex, which is the purest of all pleasures, is reduced to a commodity that can be bought or sold.

Our land, Goa, was often referred to as 'heaven on earth'. We are selling this 'heaven' to boost the tourism industry. We've sold our beaches. We've sold Nature. And we're hoping to sell the rainy season. The body of St Francis Xavier was 'exposed' to devout followers once in twelve years, in the past. We have sold that right, and it is now 'exposed' to tourists all the time. Till just the

day the ashram at Sewagram was a symbol of hope and inspiration. By turning it into another 'tourist attraction', we shall soon sell these rights.

In a world peopled by buyers and sellers alone, everything is viewed in monetary terms, and comes at a price. People are convinced that everything is for sale and can be purchased. Hence people are prepared to sell everything.

There was a time when our heads would bow reverently before seers and sages and wise men who had renounced the world. Such men seem to have disappeared ever since knowledge and wisdom have become commodities that can be bought and sold at a price. 'Renunciation? Nothing of that sort exists. No man does anything without considering his own interest ...' people say. There is no place for sacrifice and renunciation in this new society. There is no place for the ascetic who relies on the purity and strength of character. This is because principles like sacrifice, honesty, morality and strength of character cannot be bought or sold. These are priceless in today's world, not because they are worth more than anyone can pay for them, but because they are worth absolutely nothing, they command no price. Anyone can attack and besmirch another's character in today's world, it is as easy as breathing in nothing.

Jaiprakash Narayan was the most ethical and morally upright leader in the post-Nehru era, but there were people who wanted to know who funded him and took care of his expenses, too. The people who made these demands were the foremost leaders of this country! When a public figure's personal and ethical and moral character commands so little respect, is it surprising that the moral standards in this country have been degraded? Akbarally's is just a showroom that displays the wants and desires, the fantasies and ideals that fuel this consumerist society. It is a platform that shows us where we were in the past and where we have reached in such a short span of time. Morality and principles have no place in this new India, and those who abide by those principles must be viewed as relics of the past, as Dattaram seems to say.

By the time I stepped down from the bus at Bandra I had come to a vague conclusion about where the country had erred and what had led to this degradation. Some people say that it is the political class which has turned governance into a 'business' of sorts that is responsible for this mess. Others say, the degradation started when huge amounts of money were pumped into elections. Yet others believe that the root of this degradation is the corruption in the government and people in power. All these factors may be true, yet no one admits that the 'Akbarally factor' or the consumeristic culture that has been unleashed is the primary reason for the degradation in social mores.

This came as a sort of 'revelation' to me, and when Dattaram opened the door, I was ready with chants like 'Akbarally Murdabad!' and 'Down with consumerist society!'

'What happened?' he asked.

'I've just understood how and when and why this country has come to this mess!' I said.

22

HAPPINESS

met him in his office.

Tomorrow is Sunday. Where will you be, tomorrow?' he asked.

Here. In this town,' I replied.

Come home for lunch, then. We can talk to our heart's content,' he

don't accept invitations to lunch, these days. Almost half a day gets
ted in the process and I don't have much time left. But I couldn't
se his invitation so I went to his house at about eleven o'clock only to
that he wasn't at home.

He's tied up in a meeting ... should be back soon,' his wife explained.

sat there glancing at magazines as time passed steadily. It turned one
then two o'clock, but there was no sign of the man. His wife was very
ogetic, 'This happens all the time. He can't eat his meals in peace,
sn't have the time to sit and talk to someone. Just work and more
k. I can't understand what sort of work this is ...' she said.

That's because he's running a business,' I consoled her, 'but don't

worry, I'm not hungry. We'll eat as soon as he gets home.'

He returned at about half past two. 'Sorry, got held up ... Let's eat ...' and we sat down to lunch. We made small talk and he explained to me that our friendship went back forty years, to the time we shared a bench way back in school ... He was talking animatedly but I could see that his mind was on other things.

We sat side by side in class but that was not the only reason that we were friends. I loved books and always carried a Zweig or a Balzac, Dostoevsky or a Tolstoy, all of which were easily available in Goa in Portuguese translation. He was also fond of books but he made it clear that he didn't plan to become a writer. He would be a businessman and make lots of money. 'And then I'll build a bungalow in Antruz, close to my place, and fill it with the world's best books. You must come there to read and write ...,' he used to say.

'And I'll dedicate my first book to you ...,' I'd respond.

Suddenly, one day, Dr. Lohia arrived in Goa and our lives were swept into the political storm that was unleashed. I gave up my studies and dabbled in various activities till finally, after three years or so, I landed in Wardha. This was a whole new world. My interests had changed by this time, so I changed my goals. My life had taken a different path. Meanwhile, my friend, who had ventured into business, acquired a few mines. This proved very profitable for him and he became very wealthy and successful. It was then that though the words 'failure' and 'defeat' didn't exist in his dictionary.

I returned to Goa about a year before it became free from Portuguese rule, and he was already a prominent figure at that time. His business surged ahead after Liberation and he became a millionaire, and then a billionaire ... I don't know what he is worth today, but Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth certainly dwells in his home. He lives in a beautiful house and owns many motor cars. Kubera, the God of wealth, must be envying this man. It is as though prosperity wells up in his coffers and flows out of the door of his house.

Yet, this man is unable to have a meal in peace. He cannot satisfy his hunger when he is most hungry; he cannot spend time with his wife, whom he married of his own will. He can't even enjoy a good night's sleep.

'Are you still in touch with books?' I asked.

'Who's got the time for books? You don't know what it's like to run a business. Loans to be taken, installments paid. Organise parties for people, accept favours. Get involved in one venture, ignore another one. Then go slow on the next venture, concentrate on the previous one. The whole day goes in all that and there's no time for anything else,' he said.

'A business is a cause for much tension,' he suddenly said, and I thought this summed up the whole situation, it was an honest confession by one who was in the thick of things.

Why does a man get involved in business, then? To earn money, one day. And why does he need money? So that he may do whatever he pleases, buy whatever takes his fancy, go wherever he chooses. Money is necessary for a man to live a life of comfort and ease and all the measures he takes to earn this money constitutes 'business'.

When after he gets involved in his 'business' the man realises that it takes up almost all of his time. He has to attend to every aspect himself, he allows someone else to handle important tasks the results are often satisfactory. The first casualty is his personal happiness. But Man doesn't realise this and soon he begins to believe that his happiness lies in amassing more and more wealth. The definition of 'happiness' changes and he no longer regards money as an instrument that can enable him to do whatever he pleases, buy whatever takes his fancy or do whatever he wants to do. The pursuit of wealth becomes an end in itself and he finds his happiness in amassing wealth and then doubling and tripling his fortunes until he becomes a millionaire or a billionaire.

As these thoughts were passing through my mind as I gazed at him, we were sitting side by side having a meal, but I got the feeling that we had moved far away, that we were separated by a vast chasm as wide as seven oceans. I had to keep the conversation going so I asked him how long he had visited Japan.

Many times. Can't remember how many trips I've made,' he said.

And what did you see, there?'

Nara and Kamakura. Atami too. We go to Japan on a business visit and once the deal is clinched we're in a hurry to get back. I can't say that I've seen very much of the country,' he confessed.

Haven't you been to Kyoto?'

No. Not yet.'

If you've been to Japan but haven't visited Kyoto it's like going to India and not seeing the Taj Mahal! Take me with you when you go next. I'll show you around the whole country. But, on one condition. You've got a lot of pocket money'. Just be sure to set aside some 'pocket time'. Eight minutes I will do,' I said.

Yes, I must see Japan some day,' he said with a laugh as we spoke of our friends and what they had done with their lives. After a while I realised it was time to leave.

You're going to Priol, aren't you? I'm going that way too, I'll drop you off,' he said.

We climbed into his new Buick and sat side by side as we used to, as we did in Panaji. But there was a notable difference, this time. In the old days we were tied together by a common bond of intimacy and shared interests; now there was a vast ocean of apathy and indifference (lay) between us. In the forty

years that had elapsed he had surged ahead in one direction while I travelled an equal distance in the opposite one.

How much remains if five is taken away from five, someone had asked. Zero, I'd said. And if five lakhs is taken away from five lakhs, Zero, again. We are unhappy because we feel we don't have enough money. This man is so prosperous that his wealth overflows his coffers, yet he is unhappy. As long as money remains a 'servant' to Man, he can count on one of his friends and use it to satisfy his needs. But money does not remain a 'servant' always. One day, before Man realises it, money becomes his 'master' and forces him to follow its dictates, and then it becomes his worst enemy.

Ashoka erected stone pillars in different parts of the country almost two thousand years ago. Words of wisdom or edicts were etched on these pillars. One of these pillars states that a man who earns little is a happy man. It also states that a man who spends little is a happy man. A man should earn enough to satisfy his basic needs. He should spend only the amount that can be covered by his income.

If we aspire to live a life without tension we must follow Ashoka's dictate.

THE ROOT CAUSE OF OUR DEGRADATION – THE NEWLY RICH

It is the middle class that has given new direction to society, all over the world. This is the segment that has brought about revolutions. It is, in the very backbone of society and the moral standards of this middle class determine the political and economic climate of the nation. If the moral and economic fibre of the country shows degradation and decay it is because the middle class has lowered its moral standards. There are two other classes in society, the 'upper' class and the 'lower'

The upper class does not bother with 'reformation' or 'revolution', nor does it want any change in society. It would like things to remain the same till the end of time. It has always opposed change and worked to quell all forms of revolution.

What about the lower class? This has always toiled to fill other people's coffers; in the process, all that it has gained is hunger, sorrow and defeat. 'Nothing will remain the same ... it is in our fate. We will never see better days,' the lower class says.

Yet, there have been occasions when this depressed, degraded class risen up in revolt and responded to someone's impetus. It has followed Jaiprakash. It has backed Indira ji. It does not decide whom to follow — the Age that makes that decision. Like a log that has fallen into a river, it flows with the current. If it gets stuck in the undergrowth by the bank, it remains floating in shallow water till someone pushes it free again. If weighed down with a heavy boulder it sinks to the river bed and remains there till it rots and disintegrates. It has no desire or inspiration to motivate its actions.

Its value, therefore, is zero.

But when this zero trails another number, it enhances that number's value tenfold. So, those who want to reform society strive to draw this class into their fold. The degree of success in this endeavour is reflected in the success of their programmes.

It must be mentioned here that this class has never led a movement or provided leadership of any sort. That has always been the task of the middle class.

The middle class in this country has become decadent today. It is corrupt and immoral and accepts bribes without any self-respect. How did this happen? There is only one answer — the flirtation with a excessively pragmatic and materialistic attitude to life has resulted in the creation of a newly wealthy group.

Culturally and aesthetically, this group may be termed 'vulgar' and ostentatious. It is selfish and self-centered and fosters groupism. It is immensely wealthy. It is not a part of the government but it exercises total control over it. It decides who shall form the government. It does not contest elections, yet the nominated persons, no matter which party they belong to, are drawn from its folds. Without its backing even Lord Ram would not be elected in this country that professes so much faith in him. It ensures that only its 'people' are elected, so each government that is formed owes allegiance to it.

The bureaucracy has been filled with its sympathisers, who 'create' and produce nothing of their own accord. Yet, they determine who can be employed, at what price, what the margin of profit should be, what the tax rates should be and whose pockets have to be lined to facilitate this process. This 'newly wealthy' class controls the country's economy today and nothing moves without its consent.

The 'newly rich' class dreams of turning into billionaires overnight. It reveres Harshad Mehta as its icon. The country's economy has taken on the characteristics of a *satta* operation as a result. Globalisation, liberalisation, privatisation — these are the weapons they use to loot the country as they open the doors to multinational companies.

Their houses have to be seen to be believed. Marble floors. Carpets. Even the wealthy Ambanis would be embarrassed at the open show of wealth at their children's weddings. Even the rulers of the erstwhile princely states

did not commit the excesses that Lalu Prasad did at his daughter's wedding. And Lalu Prasad, mind you, is no scion of a royal family, he is a 'samajwadi' socialist leader!

Contractors, builders, smugglers – they have all risen out of these ranks. Their 'sixty white, forty black' formula has created an upheaval in the country's financial affairs. They have developed a parallel economy that thrives on creating black money, concealing it and using it to fund their ventures.

Yet, no one says a word in protest. Why? Because most of the members of this 'newly wealthy' class are members of the general public – the *Indian samaj*. The newly elected persons help members of the general public to acquire land, to fudge land records so that they seem more legitimate. When the political masters are fawned upon and kept happy, an atmosphere of corruption spreads. 'Everyone indulges in corruption. It is wrong if we do so, too?' people ask.

This has resulted in a parallel economy of black money in this country. The Reserve Bank should print new currency every year and enact legislation that the previous year's currency cannot be used after a certain date. No man should be allowed to contest elections more than twice in a life time, nor should the same person become a Minister in successive governments. But this will only be like a cry in the wilderness, no one will heed this call. For the ones who run this parallel economy are the ones who create legislation, too. The ones who create financial scams are allied with the ones appointed to punish these scamsters. The police and the thieves are from the same class. The voters who elect and the ones who are elected to power time and again share the same background. The ones who offer bribes and the ones who accept them are part of the same coterie.

Why would anyone shoot himself in the leg, then?

Is there no respite from all this? Yes, there is. The Middle class that has bred this 'newly rich' group has another offspring that is yet to come to the fore. When it does it will upset all our calculations. This group is faintly dissatisfied with the present situation and when this discontent manifests itself in an open revolt, it will change the whole scenario. The darkness of night is a new sunrise that lurks in its womb – this is not mere poetic fancy, history runs along these lines. All the revolutions that have occurred in history have followed this track. The Roman empire was destroyed; the Egyptian civilisation crumbled to dust and Chiang Kai-shek's China lost its way because of this.

We must bear in mind that such change has always occurred after streams of blood have been made to flow. Our country is no exception to this rule.

WE ARE HYPOCRITES

One doesn't know who one might suddenly bump into at the Gandhi Pratishthan. In the old days Jaiprakash always stayed here during trips to Delhi and many people came to meet him here. Even today many political activists, social workers and members of the Sarvodaya movement continue to stay here when they are in Delhi. I do so, too.

I was in Delhi about two weeks after the government bestowed the Bharat Ratna on Dr. Ambedkar. I happened to meet an old acquaintance, who belonged to the Lohia faction, in the canteen.

'I'm glad that your government has bestowed this honour on Dr. Ambedkar, he deserved it I said. 'If this honour had been given when he was alive it might have lessened his bitterness. But better late than never. You've honoured the memory of the man, and redeemed the value of this award, which the Congress had lowered its value by using it for political purposes in recent times. But tell me something, didn't Lohia deserve this award? Was he less great than those who have got it in recent times?'

The man laughed. 'I've worked with Lohia, you don't have to tell me that he was a great man he was...much greater than many of these ... but he

doesn't have the strength to draw votes.'

'What!' I exclaimed, amazed. 'Ambedkar has been given the award not because he deserves it, but because his name will draw votes! Honouring Ambedkar you are appeasing the Dalit voters, is that what you mean?'

'That's politics, don't you see?' he laughed.

I changed the topic. 'You are trying to promulgate the findings of the Mandal Commission, but you do realise, don't you, that there is no opposition all over the country. How long will you continue to appease these sections, people ask.'

'Do you oppose the findings of the Mandal Commission?' he lobbed the question back to me.

'No.'

'Why?'

'I believe that people who have been subjugated for centuries deserve a helping hand when they try to raise themselves. Lohia referred to this as 'preferential treatment'. We must not expect those who have been subjugated to suddenly enter the competitive field. They will not be able to compete, win, nor will they be able to raise their standards. The Harijan, the Girijan and women in all classes need help to raise their standards,' I declared.

'You're right. They'll be totally defeated if they're pushed into competition now.'

'But how long should they be protected like this?'

'Even two hundred years will not be enough. They have been subjugated by the other castes and classes for more than two thousand years,' I said.

'I don't agree. They will have to develop the ability to compete with the more privileged classes, so some allowance must be made for two generations or so. But not beyond that. They must not take these special privileges as their birthright. If that happens, the Harijan or Girijan will continue to flaunt that identity for all time. Like a Muslim, whose religion identifies him at all times, the Harijan or Girijan will be identified by his caste, always. We don't want that to happen. A time must come when the Harijan loses the tag and blends seamlessly into Hindu society. Ambedkar exhorted the Harijans to convert to Buddhism so that their 'separateness' would be wiped away instantly. He knew that religious conversion could create a change in their lives. By declaring that these neo-Buddhists are also eligible for the special privileges, you people have undermined Ambedkar's achievement. If they are regarded as Harijans even after adopting a classless religion like Buddhism, what was the point in converting to Buddhism, anyway?'

'Do you maintain that we should abolish these grants and privileges?' I asked.

The allowances should stay. But only for two generations, not for all. By the end of this time frame they should be confident and 'equal' to the rest of society so that they can spurn all attempts to segregate them as Untouchables or Dalits or an underprivileged group.'

'You are a greenhorn in politics!' the man laughed. 'If we announce that the privileges are for merely two generations, we will not get their support. Some other political party, maybe the Congress itself, will announce privileges for the Harijans for all time. They will garner the Harijan vote and manage to topple our government and come to power!'

He changed the topic again.

Hinduism is the predominant religion in our land and no one would criticise us if we'd called ourselves a Hindu state. Yet, we called ourselves a 'secular' state. The word 'secular' means 'that which is not connected with religion'. But we have given it a new twist. When we say we are secular we mean that all religions are equal in our eyes, and people are free to practise any religion of their choice! We ought to have brought religions closer to each other and through such interaction brought about positive changes in them all. But we have been quite listless here, each religion remains stuck in its own field. This is not why we adopted the '*Sarva dharma samabhava*' ideal; we wanted to bring about changes and make religion more relevant to our lives.'

Reforming religion is not the government's responsibility. No government should dabble in this field. Reformers in each religion should take up these tasks,' he said.

I don't agree. The government is capable of touching gold and turning it into mud, so it must not be allowed to dabble in any reformist activity. But is this really the case? Hindu religious scriptures kept a certain group of people on the fringes of society and declared that they were 'untouchables'. The government framed laws abolishing untouchability. Didn't it violate Hindu religious code, in this case?'

Social reformers were active in this field and worked to abolish untouchability for almost seventy five years. It was only after this that the law was passed,' he said.

Do you maintain that there are no reformers in the Muslim world? I know quite a few moderate, progressive thinkers ... There were so many liberal Muslims who supported Shah Bano ... Did the government support them? If it had done so, there would have been a spate of reforms in Muslim society. But you, and the Congress as well, choose to sideline progressive thinkers and prop up regressive Muslims like Syed Abdulla Bukhari ...'

The man laughed yet again. 'Don't you understand how politics works in India? Muslim society has no regard for their own progressive thinkers, these men cannot fetch votes. But Syed Abdulla Bukhari can.'

'So you will never enact a common civil code, will you?'

'Muslims will never vote for a party that advocates a common code. Some other political party will promise not to interfere in religious affairs and garner the Muslim vote and come to power.'

To sum up – No political party will enforce the common civil code because it will cost them the Muslim vote. They will shun the progressive, liberal Muslim, for the same reason. We will not assure the Harijan Girijan population that they will not be identified by this discriminatory tag forever, only because we fear that we will lose their votes. In short, there will be no reform activity in this country because of the danger of losing votes. This is called 'value based politics' and it is practised by the Congress, the National Confederation and everyone else.

The term 'politics' itself has come to mean 'the art of coming to power and clinging to it'. So Lohia will never receive the Bharat Ratna. If Kanshiram's ability to garner votes increases in the future, there will be no murmur of protest if he receives the honour instead. So, a person is not elected on the basis of his capacity to work for the country. He draws votes only if he represents some weaker section or particular class of society, and he spends his time in power ensuring that his voters remain weak and the situation remains unchanged.

Independence brought us the 'ballot box' or the right to vote, so that we could bring about change and develop the country, not keep it shackled in the same place. But this 'ballot box' has become the biggest hurdle on our path, it nurtures all our national vices and prevents progress on every front.

The country will not progress unless we develop a democratic alternative to the politics of the ballot box. We might even lose our independence if the vices continue to flourish. But no one thinks along these lines, no one looks for a remedy.

Yet we call ourselves 'secular', 'casteless' and 'a progressive democracy'. We don't differentiate between religions or castes or classes! We believe in equality!

Acharya Kripalani termed such people as 'sanctimonious humbugs'. He regarded them as frauds and tricksters. Hypocrites. Liars.

It's the truth. We are hypocrites. Liars.

25

WHO NEEDS HOLIDAYS?

Gandhi Jayanti is a holiday declared by the central government and the state government cannot remove it from the list of holidays. When Sharbhab Parrikar realised this, he prudently withdrew his plan of deleting the holiday. Yet, many people were upset when they heard of his proposal. Why? Because they nurtured strong sentiments about Gandhi? No! They were just upset at the thought of losing a holiday.

Everyone expects a holiday on Sunday as a matter of course. In some states Saturday is a holiday, too. There are fifty two Saturdays and fifty two Sundays in a year. There are eighteen 'public holidays' comprising festivals and religious celebrations as well as birth and death anniversaries of various important people. One can take thirty days 'privileged' leave during which one can rest at home or travel or do whatever one likes. Thirty days are set aside as 'sick leave' – one needn't fall sick, of course, the law merely recognises one's right to fall ill. Besides this one can avail of eight or twelve days of 'casual leave', in case one is faced with a sudden emergency. Thus, one gets a total of one hundred and ninety four holidays in a year, which is almost six and a half months. So a person works only for five and

a half months annually. Yet he draws his salary for all the twelve months the year!

How can a nation develop under such circumstances? No developed country has as many holidays as we do.

Nature has no holidays nor does it pause to rest. The sun, the moon, the earth and all the animals and insects and birds that dwell upon it work busily all day. They build anthills or nests or burrows and give birth to their young. They gather the food that Nature continues to replenish every day and tend their little ones and guard them from predators.

These creatures take rest only when they are completely exhausted. And this process of rest is an integral part of their daily activities like walking, feeding or breathing. Self employed persons like the goldsmith or the carpenter or the potter do not take holidays. Neither do poets and writers, sculptors and artists, singers and other musicians. They are engrossed in their work throughout the day, even as they bathe or eat or spend time with their families. Even as they lie exhausted in their beds they continue to think about their work, and this, too is a part of the creative process. They are never tired or bored with their work because this is something that they enjoy doing. Man gets immense satisfaction when he performs a task that he enjoys. This satisfaction is reflected in the total development of his personality and in his physical, mental and emotional well-being.

Such work is referred to as 'creative work' and Man does this with enthusiasm.

It is only those who are in service who seek holidays. Why is this so? It is because they are engaged in tasks that they do not enjoy. They are bored and tired of their repetitive work and continue with it only because of the remuneration it brings. They are forced to work because they need to earn a living. Man needs money, but he has other needs too. These 'other' needs are not satisfied by the work he performs.

In an 'ideal' society no man should be forced to perform tasks that he is unwilling to do. A society that forces people to do this merely to keep their bellies filled is unacceptable and should be destroyed. A new society that gives everyone the time and the right to engage themselves in creative work should be established in its place.

It's not as though people do not earn money by doing creative work. They do. But this happens at the end, when they have a finished product to show for their efforts. Earning money is not the aim of such work, neither is it the inspiration behind it. The aim as well as the inspiration that drives creative work is the urge to express oneself, to receive satisfaction and inner peace.

Man discovered the power of steam and decided to harness its strength to drive machines. Thus work that took up a whole day could be completed in an hour. Those who were in the forefront of the creative movement were delighted by this development. They thought this would lead to a society where machines would perform routine mechanical tasks in the industrial process and men would get time to develop their creative faculties.

However, their calculations went astray. It is true that machines began to perform routine mechanical tasks and production increased manifold, but the spare time that people should have spent in creative activities was 'hijacked' on the way. As a result, a new economy developed, and all those who were enmeshed in this new mechanical age had no time for anything else. They didn't have the time to read or to listen to music. They visited Tokyo, but they didn't have the time to make a short trip to Kyoto as well. They couldn't spare time for their wives and children, or to enjoy a meal in peace. Machines have given us many bodily comforts, they have contributed to our material wealth but they have impoverished our spirits. We have become mere cogs in the mechanical process, 'money making machines' as it were.

Why did this happen?

Man was unable to control the size and productive capacity of the machines he designed. Like the Puranic demons Bashpsen and Vidyutsen these machines had a monstrous appetite for work. They needed a constant supply of raw material, so those lands that produced this raw material had to be conquered first. The goods that emerged from these machines had to be sold, and it became necessary to annex territories where these markets lay. This led to Imperialism and empires were built and strengthened, culminating in the two World Wars in which crores of innocent people lost their lives.

Imperialism petered out after World War II, but like a man-eating tiger that cannot do without human blood, these imperial nations couldn't do without their colonies. They developed new colonies by inventing terms like 'globalisation', 'liberalisation' and 'free trade', and we, the hapless citizens of the 'third world' find ourselves enmeshed in their net. We couldn't remove the drudgery from our lives. We do the same work today even though we call it by another name.

When the colonies broke away from the Empire and became independent nations they should have adopted a new economic framework that would give the people opportunities to develop their creativity. This would have contributed to their physical, mental and spiritual well-being and filled them with joy and contentment. Their inner lives would have been enriched and whatever works of art they created would have ranked as some of the most beautiful in the world. The new economic framework would have made use of machines, but these would be in Man's control. Man would not be manipulated by machines. It is our misfortune that such an order did not come to pass.

Till such time as Men are given control of small machines and allowed to manufacture goods of their choice, the economy created by Vidyutsen and Bashpsen will continue to flourish, and Man will not be able to do the work of his choice. He will be forced into drudgery to fill his stomach, and since this will not make him happy, he will get bored and tired and look forward to holidays.

One cannot hope for a creative society to develop in these economic conditions.

26

MAN'S PLACE IN THE UNIVERSE

One time God was the power at the centre of the world. No one had seen Him. No one could say with any certainty that He did exist. Yet, the world stirred without His consent.

One day Man decided that he would occupy this hallowed spot. God would take care of the universe and all the creatures in it, but Man would decide whether life on earth would replicate heaven or hell. Unlike the other creatures on earth he was endowed with certain faculties, which gave him a choice – he could become cultured and educated and aspire to godliness, or he could cultivate his baser instincts and become perverse and devilish in his ways. God was free to regulate the whole universe, but Man would decide how his world would be run. He didn't waste any time after that. He dethroned God from the niche at the centre of the world and occupied that spot, himself. God was happy. He had created this niche for Man. It had taken Him three times the amount of time and labour to fashion Man than it had taken Him to create the entire universe. He had given Man a gift that was more precious and wondrous than anything he had bestowed on other living creatures – he had given Man an intellect. 'Use your mind carefully and decide how

this world should be run. I shall recede to a tiny corner, deep with recesses of your soul. If ever you need my help, just call out to me and I shall rush to your aid,' God said.

Primitive Man had little idea about his place in the world but as he became more civilised he began to understand his unique position and the 'mission' that he had to fulfil. Science told him that he was a by-product of an evolutionary process, and therefore he was an 'agent' for development.

As soon as he occupied this seat of power, however, Man forgot about his mission and the need for development and all those other things. He thought he was God. The grandeur of his position made him feel that he was invincible; that he had barely made the transition from the primitive to the cultured stage and he still had a long way to go before he could acquire godly qualities, simply didn't enter his mind. He forgot that he would have to cultivate virtues and refine his thoughts and instincts as he progressed towards godliness. So, instead of being 'aware' and receptive to good influences he floundered in pleasure and worldly comforts.

It was around this time that two démons, in the form of steam and electricity, came into his life. They introduced him to many new comforts and pleasures and inspired him to subjugate Nature for his personal pleasure. He felt that the environment, which had been painstakingly built by Nature over countless years, was created solely for his pleasure. It was as though he was the Master of the whole world.

This was the beginning of his downfall and he has been descending steadily, ever since.

In recent times, a new thought has entered his mind. He has begun to feel that the demons steam and electricity have become his masters and have dethroned him from the niche of power at the centre of the world. He has become weak because of his slavish attachment to comfort and pleasure, hence he is unable to protest. They offer him various comforts and let him wallow in pleasure, but he has begun to realise that this is not happiness. He is a mere figurehead, the real power has vanished from his hands.

This is the Industrial age and Machines are the omnipotent deities that control the world. Machines have no regard for Man's feelings, nor do they value his presence. 'You cannot do this job properly. Let me do it. I can do it better than you,' they seem to say as work is wrenched out of the hands of Man in this increasingly mechanised world. Out of a hundred men, ninety nine do their jobs as only one man is needed to operate the machine.

Before the second World War, industrialisation led to the formation of powerful nations which set about acquiring colonies in different parts of the world. The need to provide raw material for their industries made these nations feed off the resources of these colonies. The period after the War saw a shift in power as the colonies themselves became independent and industrialised. The l

In these erstwhile colonies began to suck resources from the villages and them. Today, the boundaries between nations have become virtual as their industries collaborate to suck resources from the countryside.

In the past Man worked with his hands and with his brain, pouring his heart and soul into his work and achieving immense satisfaction from what he managed to create. With mechanisation Man is no longer responsible for the entire product. 'You do this. He will do this. A third person will handle this task,' Man is told and he becomes a mere cog in the manufacturing process. His work becomes dull and repetitive, he gains no creative satisfaction. All the vigour and energy seeps out of his soul as he turns barren and dry.

Mechanisation has made the world a smaller place as better means of communication have shrunk distances. But the chasm between Men has widened as never before. It is as though individuals are separated by vast seas of apathy and indifference, the springs of love and affection seem to have run dry.

Man has now realised that industrialisation has only added to his woes and fears, that he will not attain happiness by taking this route. Machines must be divested of the power that they have begun to wield and Man must reclaim his position of authority at the centre of the world. Gandhi often declared that a humane political and economic system could develop only if Man occupied such a central position.

Only then will war and strife cease to exist in this world.

YADAA YADAA HI DHARMASYA

Whenever religion and morality are threatened by the forces of evil, an incarnation of the Lord will appear; all that is good and virtuous will be saved and all that is wicked will be destroyed!

How much faith Hindus have in this assurance given by Sri Krishna!

But how successful was Sri Krishna, himself an incarnation of the Lord, in achieving this end? He was a friend of the Pandavas but he could not prevent Yudhishtir from playing away from the game of dice. He could not prevent the Pandavas from dishonouring Draupadi, and he was powerless as countless warriors were annihilated on the battlefield before his eyes. Then again, even among the members of his own community, the Yadavas, fell upon each other in drunken revelry, what did Sri Krishna do? Nothing.

When men begin to cheat and destroy each other to gain individual wealth, even an incarnation of the Lord is powerless before them – hasn't Sri Krishna proved that this is true?

Why is it that all these 'avatars' or incarnations of the Lord have appeared in India alone? If the Lord appears as an incarnation only when righteousness and morality are threatened and wickedness holds sway,

why does this happen so often in our land?

We have a treasure house of knowledge in the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*, the *Ramayan* and the *Mahabharat*, the *Brahmasutras*, and the *Bhagwad Gita*, and in various texts in the regional languages. Our civilisation, which is five thousand years old is still vibrant and alive, while other civilisations that date back to this time have long since vanished into history. We have produced towering personalities who could only be products of this civilisation and this land. Despite all these factors, why is it that morality and righteousness continue to be threatened and an incarnation of the Lord has to appear so many times to uproot the forces of evil that hold sway in this land?

This is because we merely pay lip service to morality and religion. These principles do not take root in our hearts or course through our veins.

In order to prevent competition and to ensure that each individual performed his duties properly, our ancestors divided society, which was fragmented into thousands of sects and communities, into four broad groups. But was this classification on the basis of occupation a success? The Brahmins, who were expected to pursue knowledge and to teach others, infringed on the tasks marked out for the other groups. They dabbled in trade, like the Vaishyas, and took up administrative jobs, like the Shudras, forsaking the tasks that had been marked out for them.

The Kshatriyas were responsible for the safety of the country and were expected to administer it well, but how successful were they in this regard? There were innumerable Kshatriya clans – the Rajput Kshatriyas, the Maratha Kshatriyas, the Chaddhe Kshatriyas, the Kshatriya Bhandaris and all their sub-castes – yet, whenever bands of marauders attacked the country, these Kshatriya defenders were powerless and the invaders became the rulers of the land. What can one say about the prowess of these Kshatriyas who were unable to stave off a single marauding attack? They were brave and full of valour, no doubt, but all their energy was expended in fighting with each other, and they often enlisted the help of outsiders to gain supremacy over other Kshatriya kings. Not a single Kshatriya king established an empire in this land. The Maurya dynasty flourished, but the Mauryas were Shudras by caste. The Sungas were Brahmins, the Guptas were Vaishyas and the Reddys, who were Shudras, established the Vijayanagar empire. The Kshatriyas, who were the warrior castes, were unsuccessful in this field.

We claim that there is no religion as glorious as our own, that Indian philosophy has advanced to great heights and we have had more great seers and visionaries than any other nation in the world. But is this true? Our religion tells us to follow the path of Truth, our philosophers and visionaries have explained the importance of Truth, yet why is it that Truth finds no place in our lives? There is no place for Truth in trade and business, and it is missing in our political life.

are a breed of imposters. Basic human traits are missing from our nature. We only recognise that which will bring profit to ourselves, so we do not engage in elaborate exercises to deceive and disparage others, is there any 'religion' or activity that keeps us so engaged? We are not bothered about society or about the country, in fact thugs and smugglers masquerade as saviours in our land and we are willing to sell our country to them for a little personal profit. If an incarnation of the Lord appears in a land such as this, what can he possibly achieve?

We are more responsible for the dire moral straits in which our country finds itself than the Lord, and only we can save it from further degradation. We must resolve to forsake falsehood and treachery, even though it shall cause us material loss; even if this country can be saved, even an incarnation of the Lord will achieve nothing, otherwise.

Religion has made us blind and lame by telling us that we are a part of the 'Brahma' or Supreme Power that permeates this universe. Religion does not tell us that we are also members of society and that our welfare depends on the welfare of our society and of our country. Hence, when we strive to better ourselves, we are not concerned with the progress of society or of the country. We are unmoved by other people's joy or sorrow, their very existence is immaterial to us. We have no national character and the very concept of brotherhood doesn't enter our minds. 'The individual for himself and God for all' is the maxim that rules our life, so we spare no thought for society or the country. What can an incarnation of the Lord do for people like us? Even He shall be forced to give up in despair.

Al-Biruni, an Arab scholar who accompanied Mohammed of Ghazni wrote that Hindus believe that there is no religion as glorious as their own. This was true even in the twelfth century A.D. Eight centuries have passed since then, but we have made little progress. We are egoistic and proud and we are blinded by our faith. Our religion has to point out the fact that we are a selfish people, that we are vain and base and uncharitable by nature; till such time as we become aware of these imperfections in ourselves, no matter how many times the Lord appears in incarnation, nothing concrete will be achieved.

WE FOOL OURSELVES AS WELL AS OTHERS

don't believe in caste or class. I don't look down upon anyone. All men are equal, in my eyes ...'

I was tempted to laugh out loud as I heard him say these words. Why should I come here to listen to all this, I said to myself. He seemed as pompous and pretentious as the intellectual who declares that gold has no value in his eyes, it is as worthless as mud!

He must have noticed my mirth for he stared at me questioningly... I said to myself, 'You are different from the rest of us, you feel superior, don't you? But you don't realise that you are fooling yourself. You are just like us ... where do we believe in caste or class? We don't look down upon people, do we ...?'

But tell me this, have you ever said to your wife, 'You look tired. Go rest for a while. I'll make you some tea.' Have you ever said this? We haven't, either. Have you ever helped her in the kitchen? Cleaned the fish or chopped vegetables or ground coconut into paste? Have you ever drained the water from the rice pot? No? We haven't, either. If we felt sorry that the woman of the house was overworked we hired a cook to take charge of the kitchen. Since the

cook would not do the sweeping and washing of vessels and clothes, hired a maid servant as well. What have you done that is any different from this? You've slung a string of black beads about her neck and labelled her your 'wife'. And then you've turned her into a cook, a maid servant and your partner in bed. If you haven't established equality in your home, what sort of equality will you practice outside?

Like us, the education you have received has feudal overtones. Have you seen any educated person clamber up a palm to pluck coconuts or climb a mango tree to harvest mangos? Have you seen an educated person ploughing a field? Our feudal tradition makes us look down on the household chores that women perform. Similarly these tasks are regarded as being 'lowly' and we delegate them to servants. We cannot exist without the help of servants and labourers. You cannot, either. So what makes you better than the rest of us?

Equality is not something one talks about, it should be a part of one's very existence. But it isn't. The difference between you and the rest of us, lies here. You are shameless enough to boast that you believe in equality. We are too timid to make any such claims.

Gandhi was the only one who realised that there was no point in merely preaching about all men being equal, people had to be trained to accept the fact. He established an ashram at Sabarmati 'so that inmates could serve the country, and also receive instruction in how to serve the country'. A number of similar ashrams were established in different parts and these served as laboratories for Gandhi's beliefs. The inmates of the ashram shared all the tasks amongst themselves - they swept the floor and the courtyard, they washed the vessels and the clothes, some worked in the gardens while others worked in the kitchen. Acharya Kripalani would roll out 'rotis' while Kishor Mashruwala cleaned rice and dal and chopped vegetables. Kripalani, President of the Congress in those days, and Mashruwala, the Head of the Gandhi Sewa Sangh, were very vocal in their support of Gandhi's ideas. Rajen babu and Rajaji were also nurtured in this tradition. Though they resided in Rashtrapati Bhavan after Independence, both men made it a point to wash their own garments while taking a bath.

Gandhi himself, took part in all these activities. He knew that if work was classified as being 'high' or 'low', the people who discharged the tasks would always remain segregated from each other. By stressing that all work was equally respectable and necessary, the ashrams sought to remove the difference between 'high' work and 'lowly' chores and the vast chasm that existed between the people who discharged them.

The most important task in the ashram was the cleaning of the toilet - a chore that is regarded as the lowliest of work. But this was the first question one had to answer on entering the ashram. 'Who is the most "vile" of the two, the one who makes the place filthy, or the one who cleans up the filth?' The answer came unbidden from the depths of our

‘the one who creates the filth.’ Hence the task of cleaning the was accomplished without resistance and an elaborate programme of production was developed in a scientific manner as part of this mass drive.”

ashrams in different parts of the country still follow these practices regarding the cleaning of toilets and the production of manure. Total manure developed from one toilet in one day costs a rupee, the stands to gain manure valued at three hundred and sixty five rupees per year. There are some five lakh villages in this country and eighty per cent of our population still resides in these villages. If we can set up toilets in the villages, assuming that there are five members in each household, the nation stands to gain manure valued at sixteen crore rupees annually. If this sum is multiplied by three hundred and sixty five we can estimate that the nation will get manure valued at five thousand eight hundred and eighty crore rupees annually. Would we need to procure chemical fertilisers after this?

It was no doubt aimed at developing an independent economy, but it played a part in uprooting our feudal beliefs that viewed such chores as ‘lowly’ or menial ones. When a man cleans his own toilet, he gets freed from his feudal mind-set and has no qualms about tackling other menial chores. He frees himself from many of the problems that vexed him in the past and there is a remarkable transformation as he stops regarding himself as being superior to other men. All distinctions of caste and class are wiped away from his mind as he is liberated from his feudal mind-set. Only such a man has the moral authority to say that he doesn’t belong to any caste or class, that he doesn’t look down upon anyone, that all men are equal in his eyes. In other words, it is only when the upper classes discard that is generally shunned as being ‘lowly’ or menial that they will be able to discard their feudal mentality. But does our daily routine and discipline prepare us for this? Certainly not. How, then, can we avoid laughing at ourselves when we hear such ‘sermons’ being preached?

There is a limit to being sanctimonious. I have not witnessed such rampant hypocrisy anywhere else.

The only foreign countries I have visited are Japan, China and more recently, America. There are no maid servants or cooks in Japan, each member of the household discharges his responsibilities and this happens even in wealthy families. They have not learnt these principles in any ashram, it is an essential part of their culture. Even in America where one doesn’t see people extracting work from menials, there is no hesitation in tackling different chores. In Japan and America the population might be concentrated in cities, but China is a country with lakhs of villages like our country. Yet, there are no servants in people’s houses. No people are employed to clean toilets and remove refuse. I did not see porters carrying luggage to the airport or railway station or bus stand in China. Hence people travel

with just a few pieces of luggage, whatever they can carry themselves. Since there are no servants to clean up after them people use few vessels while cooking food.

It is only in our country that we see this divide between work that is a 'high' class and that which is more 'lowly'. The notion that numerous servants indicate how wealthy a person is, is confined to our country and is actually a sign of our ignorance. A truly wealthy person is noble and cultured, it is only those with a feudal mind-set that display ignorance. Since the feudal atmosphere is so widespread in our country, the educated classes as well as the wealthy ones continue to be ignorant. It is only those people who 'announce' that they don't believe in caste or class, that actually believe in equality. A truly cultured person displays these traits in the manner in which he lives his life.

You have been bred in a feudal atmosphere, just like the rest of the country. How can one refrain from laughing at your words?

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WHO TURNED THIS COUNTRY INTO A NATION OF COWARDS?

It is said that Buddha and his principles of non-violence turned this country into a nation of cowards. But who told these people that Buddha propagated non-violence in the first place? His teachings appear in the *Itika* –

'Life is full of sorrow. We have brought this sorrow upon ourselves. We must rid ourselves of this sorrow. I have drawn up an eight-fold path to rid us of this sorrow.' These are the four basic points that appear in all his teachings. He spent his whole life telling people about these four points in various ways.

The concept of Ahimsa or non-violence is only implied in the vow 'I will not kill any living creature' that together with the four other vows against adultery, theft, vices and misappropriation of wealth, constitutes the *Yachsheel* or five cardinal principles. One cannot state that Buddha propagated non-violence merely on this basis.

Mahavir, however, propagated the concept of ahimsa. Each living creature that is born on earth has the right to live. This is a 'fundamental right'. Man must not kill any creature, certainly not in order to eat its

flesh, he decreed. Mahavir used Ahimsa as a tool to make Man 'cultured'. The question of protecting one's country didn't arise in those times. It was only two hundred and fifty years after Mahavir that Alexander invaded the country. Chandragupta Maurya repulsed that attack. Chandragupta Maurya was a Jain who followed Mahavir's teachings. Yet, his belief in non-violence didn't hinder him from taking necessary action.

Chandragupta Maurya's grandson Ashoka converted to Buddhism. He invaded Kalinga and made it a part of his empire. Overcome with remorse at the lakhs of people who were killed in that battle, Ashoka became a Buddhist and vowed that he would never attack another kingdom again. He was instrumental in spreading Buddhism all over the country and abroad. But would this make him disband his army? No. His claim to fame as a 'valiant emperor' continued till the end of his days.

If Buddhism could make a nation cowardly, Japan, which is a Buddhist nation and has been so for twelve hundred years, should have been the worst of the lot. Yet this nation has never buckled down before anyone. It stumbled a little when Commander Perry trained his guns on it, but it soon regained its composure and stood erect. It only tasted defeat in the Second World War, because it had lost the urge to fight, but because it had no weapons that were more powerful than the Atom bomb. But was it disheartened in any way? In only a few years time Japan rose out of the ashes, like the phoenix bird. Buddhism had taught the nation that it was necessary to stand up again even after being knocked down seven times in a row.

Now, let us look at our own country –

In 712 AD Mohammed bin Quasim, a callow youth, fifteen or seventeen years of age, attacked Sind and made it a part of the Caliph of Baghdad's empire in just eight days. The ruler of Sind was neither a Jain nor a Buddhist, he was a Hindu Brahmin. The Rajput kings were very proud of their Hindu heritage and enjoyed renown as mighty warriors. Not a day passed without their swords being rattled in some skirmish or the other. Yet, when Mohammed of Ghazni came on the scene, all these valiant warriors were blown away like the dust beneath the marauder's horse hoofs.

The Peshwas of Maharashtra were renowned warriors, like the Rajputs. When one reads stories of their exploits, one wonders why their empire didn't stretch further across the land. Yet, no sooner did a handful of English soldiers enter Pune, the mighty Peshwas bowed down in abject surrender. The Peshwas, like the Rajputs, were neither Buddhists nor Jains. How is it, then that these mighty Hindu kings surrendered so abjectly to the enemy at the slightest sign of trouble?

There is only one answer to this – Hindus have always been a cowardly race. It is the Hindu religion that fosters cowardice.

Hindu kings enjoyed the perks of their position but they didn't bother

and their states. Each kingdom had an army, but it was preoccupied in protecting the ruler rather than guarding the frontiers. The enemies were usually neighbouring kingdoms or princes who were related to the ruler. The ruler of Sind had an army, but it stayed close to the palace to protect the king rather than at the border of the kingdom. Sind was a coastal province, and it would have been prudent to have a naval force stationed there. The Caliph, who had conquered central Asia, north Africa and southern Europe had an extensive empire that stretched up to the borders of Sind. The King should have realised that if the Caliph so wished he could easily attack and annex Sind. But no one bothered to get information about what was happening in the outside world.

If the Rajputs had done so, they would have kept an eye on Mohammed Ghazni's activities. They would have realised that instead of fighting amongst themselves to become Emperor, these neighbouring princely states could have presented a united defence against Mohammed of Ghazni. But they didn't do this. As a result, they opened all the gates for the Muslim marauders to enter the country and rule it for the next eight centuries. Whether this happened because of the valour of the Muslim invaders or because of the stunted vision, the divisive forces and the cowardly temperament of the Hindu rulers, is a thought that calls for debate. While Scindia and Holkar squabbled with each other while attempting to capture Pune, the division in their ranks prevented them from keeping the British at bay.

A nation's safety does not depend entirely on the exploits of a brave king or a strong army. The ordinary citizens must gather in support of their efforts. However, in order to achieve this end, all divisions in society have to be removed and each man must feel involved in another's well-being. None of the Hindu thinkers realised this truth. In order to maintain law and order they divided society into four castes and marked the Kshatriyas as the ones responsible for ruling the kingdom and protecting the people. There were stray instances of Brahmins or Vaishyas or Shudras ruling certain kingdoms but these were exceptions rather than the rule. These three caste groups were generally unaffected by changes in rulership, they often didn't know whether the rulers were natives or invaders from other lands. They merely prayed that they be allowed to live their lives without hindrance.

The fourfold division of society is the root cause of the country being subjugated by invading armies through the years. Manu, who lived three centuries after Buddha, cannot be blamed entirely, because this system was in vogue even in Vedic times. It is the Hindu 'vision', propagated by preceptors like the Shankaracharya that should be blamed. One does not know if Manu really existed or is merely a product of myth, but the Shankaracharya is a historical figure, born a hundred and fifty years after Mohammed of Ghazni invaded Sind.

The Shankaracharya is revered for strengthening Hindu society that had been fragmented over the years. Yet, despite historical evidence that the caste system was creating hurdles in unifying this society, he declared that 'Shudras should be barred from learning the Vedas. If, by chance they heard portions of these holy books, they should be rendered deaf with molten lead poured into their ears; if they dared chant verses from these books, their tongues should be cut off.' Such were his pronouncements! How can a society where such pronouncements are made ever hope to be united? Such a society will always be in disarray, it will always be cowardly in nature.

It is the Hindu religion that has made us a nation of cowards. The teachings of the Hindu religion and the preceptors who have preached them are responsible for this. Why do we blame ahimsa and the Buddha for this situation?

Let us examine our own religion, our philosophy and our sacred books first. Only then shall we know why we are a cowardly nation.

EDUCATORS THEMSELVES MUST BE EDUCATED

was visiting a friend who stays in Panaji. He has only one son and that son a little daughter who studies in Upper K.G. The child, who is adored by the whole family, was made to recite the 'Twinkle twinkle little star' rhyme for me. She did so, shyly.

'What a smart little girl!' I said, patting her on the back, but the episode made me thinking.

Are English children made to learn Konkani nursery rhymes as part of their education? Can children from Punjab or Bengal or Kerala be forced to learn rhymes which are not in their mother tongue? Our education system itself is at fault now that it is being controlled by ignorant people.

The children in the house had planted a rose bush in the garden and they'd rush there every morning to check if a flower had bloomed. I told them not to bother about the flower, it would appear in time. What they had to do was to water the plant, to add manure and to keep the area clear of weeds, the gardener would take care of the rest. They did just that, and sure enough, one day a flower bloomed, and everyone was delighted.

Education too, should be imparted in this manner. A child need not be

'taught' anything till he is about seven years of age, for he is always active and learns things by observing his environment. When the infant is born his sense, of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch are fully formed and the process of learning begins through these organs. It is not language that is the 'medium of instruction'; the five senses play this role. The infant is not concerned with signs and symbols but uses his sense organs to become familiar with shapes, colours, forms and smells of everything in the world about him.

The child learns to recognise his mother's touch before he learns to address her as 'mother' or 'mummy'. He strives to become one with the birds and animals and insects that he sees about him, and stuffs whatever he finds into his mouth. He tries to identify the various levels of sound, ranging from whisper and screams to the music of Bhimsen Joshi, that he hears in the world about him. The process of acquiring information is an ongoing process and the child is caught up with questions of 'what', 'why' and 'how', quite unlike the average adult. In a situation where knowledge is being acquired through the senses, teaching children English nursery rhymes and Sanskrit shlokas is foolish. Don't the people who control the education system in this country realise how foolish and irrelevant these efforts are?

The labour room where a woman gives birth should not be fitted with harsh, glaring lights. The infant should emerge into a dimly lit world and should then be gradually introduced to brighter lights. Similarly, the child should be allowed to experience the various facets of the world about him through the framework of his senses. If the experts who control the education system in this country do not understand this, what sort of 'expertise' do they possess? Why should we let them decide how children should be educated, in that case?

Left to himself the child acquires knowledge through experience. He also gains self confidence in the process. This entire process is known as 'education', whereas what an external agency imparts to the child is termed 'instruction'. A child needs 'education', not 'instruction', so we should let him learn as much as he can through his own experience in his formative years. He should be allowed to play as much as he wants, to create a ruckus or to take things apart. These are methods by which the child gains experience and learns things. He should not be tied down by rules and regulations at this age, for excessive discipline ruins the child's spirit and makes it warped. Freedom is essential for the child's development.

It was the Church that set up the education system in Europe where languages like Latin and Greek were taught in schools. This led to undue emphasis being laid on the teaching of languages.

Children should be drawn out of the four walls of the school and taken on Nature treks. They should see how birds build their nests, the materials they use, the methods they adopt to create the hollow space inside for the eggs to rest upon. They should observe how bees draw nectar from certain

fic types of flowers, how they call out to other bees as they flit about elaborate dance – this is education in its truest sense.

How much time have we spent in observing Nature? Do we know species of birds and animals and insects can be seen in Goa? If we unaware of their names and characteristics, what sort of education do we hope to impart?

I realised how ignorant I was when I started taking my grandchildren for a walk to the hillock every evening. The other children in the neighbourhood began to accompany us, too. I realised soon enough that I was ignorant, but the children knew the names of birds and where they built their nests. They could identify snakes and knew which ones were venomous and which ones were harmless. They were familiar with the flowering patterns of various trees and bushes and knew which ones had medicinal properties too.

These children didn't need to be educated, I realised. It is a section of teachers in Goa who need to be educated. Only then will the problem of text books and medium of instruction and other such vexing issues be solved. Those who insist on stuffing nursery rhymes and religious verses down children's throats should be taught a lesson, I feel.

THE WORLD WAITS FOR HIM

We've used the word 'ahimsa' or non-violence so many times that it is a facile term. If we stop to ponder a while, we shall see that the world has been working in a non-violent fashion always.

It is incorrect to say that Mahavir discovered the concept of ahimsa, for people were aware that it was a desirable habit even in earlier times. However, in Mahavir's age it became a 'necessity', for it satisfied a latent anger in people who were disgusted with the violence and bloodshed around them. Animal slaughter during Vedic sacrifices; the unprecedented bloodshed during the Kurukshetra battle which resulted in every family in North India losing a member on the battle field, and Janmajaya's vendetta against the Naga tribes caused people to recoil in horror. They turned away from violence, be it as a means to attain salvation, to attain political power or to keep their stomachs filled.

If we must spill so much blood to go to heaven, maybe we should look for other options even though they lead to hell, the people of the Vedic age began to say. A section of Rishis criticised the Vedas for the emphasis they put on animal sacrifice. The *Upanishads*, which were composed soon after,

reflect a sort of revolt against the *Vedas* because they denounce the '*karma kaand*' which deals with the rituals and the practical aspects, and give credence only to the '*dnyaana kaand*' or the theoretical section. The '*yadnya*' or sacrificial fire thus declined in importance in the age of the *Upanishads* and when the Buddha, that apostle of compassion, arrived on the scene it vanished totally. The term '*yagya*' itself acquired a new meaning in the age of Buddha.

When the Pandavas won the war at Kurukshetra after annihilating countless soldiers in the Kaurava army, Yudhishtira himself exclaimed in disgust, 'What sort of victory is this! To me this victory is worse than defeat! There is no need to kill someone or be killed oneself in defence of one's country, war cannot solve any issues, people realised.

Janmajaya was the great grandson of the Pandavas. His father Parikshit was murdered by Takshak, an adivasi chieftain, so Janmajaya set out to destroy every member of the Naga tribe to which Takshak belonged. This war of extermination continued till the sage Astik, who bore Aryan and Naga blood, intervened on their behalf. The few members of this indigenous tribe of snake-worshippers were forced to flee into the forests. Didn't these indigenous tribes have a right to live on their own land, people asked each other as they realised that one cannot annihilate an entire race even though one unleashes a war of extermination against them.

Experiences such as these had prepared the ground, so when Mahavir arrived with his message of ahimsa people readily embraced the concept. Innumerable families adopted a vegetarian diet. This is perhaps the only country in the world where some families have eaten only vegetarian food for generations. The Konkani word for 'vegetarian' is 'shivrak', and this comes from 'shraavak' or 'follower of Lord Jena'. All Jains are vegetarians, and though Brahmins traditionally ate meat, some Brahmin families turned vegetarian in this age because of Jain influence.

Our people, however, tend to carry principles to extraordinary lengths, and this is seen in the reactions of Mahavir's followers in later ages. They wrapped lengths of cloth about their mouths and noses to prevent themselves from inhaling tiny organisms with their breath. They stopped eating potatoes, carrots, yam, radish and other roots and tubers that grew underground for fear of killing tiny organisms in the soil when these vegetables are dug out. To atone for the sin of killing tiny organisms underfoot they began to sprinkle sugar beside ant hills. The concept of ahimsa or non-violence should have been extended to all aspects of life, but the Jains confined it to dietary matters alone.

If someone slapped us, how should we, as believers in ahimsa react? The Jains had no answers as to how violence could be countered in a non-violent manner. It was many centuries after Mahavir that Jesus Christ provided the answer. 'Turn the other cheek', he said. A passive reaction makes the attacker feel ashamed of his action and the violence peters out. Christ's

marks a logical development of the concept practised by Mahavir, continues to grow and develop new ramifications through the ages. Using undue advantage of people to attain one's own ends; cheating, deception, unleashing a reign of terror and extortion – all these are of violence too, and ahimsa must be able to counter these ills. Jesus was inspired by Christ when he accused the state of exploiting the perished masses and creating widespread poverty while pretending to be concerned with their welfare. He highlighted the paradox inherent in the situation and said that the poor do not need pity, nor do they need help if the state removes the fetters that bind the people they are quite capable of working and looking after their own interests, they do not need help from the state.

Marx did not owe allegiance to Christ. But he took the concept of ahimsa to another level when he claimed that the tools of production should be held in the hands of those who use them, those who are not directly involved in the work should have no control. Fields should belong to those who toil in them, workers in mines and factories should own those establishments and the government, too, should be run by the people. Lords, rich miners and factory owners, who sucked the blood of the working classes, should be divested of their holdings, if necessary by force. Marx wanted to rid the world of exploitation and to create a society based on law – formulating another aspect of ahimsa, unknowingly, he was right.

In the twentieth century Gandhi used ahimsa as a tool in his agitation against apartheid in South Africa, and Nelson Mandela carried the movement forward till apartheid was abolished. In the United States Martin Luther King used non-violence to ensure that Black Americans enjoyed the same civil liberties that the Whites enjoyed, thus ending discrimination based on the colour of their skin. This system of peaceful satyagraha was at the heart of the Indian movements that made Indians resolute and made us the masters of our own country within thirty years.

There are two tasks that remain to be done in a peaceful manner. The neo-colonialism that has spread all over the world because of increased globalisation must be stopped. The numerous wars and agitations that flare up intermittently in different corners of the world should be stopped and this can only happen if the manufacture of weapons is curtailed.

The world awaits the arrival of a new Messiah whose life will embody the concept of ahimsa. He will come, within the span of this new generation, mainly, for the march of ahimsa hasn't stopped. It must not stop.

CAN YOU HEAR THIS VOICE?

Mahavir and Buddha belonged to the same age. Both men wielded great influence, yet, the Vedic tradition exalted Buddha and hailed him as an incarnation of Vishnu. They did not do the same to Mahavir. Why? Mahavir did pose a threat to the Vedic tradition. Buddha did. That is the only answer I find.

The yadnya or sacrificial fire and the rituals surrounding it formed the basis of Vedic tradition, and the Brahmins or priestly class were the ones who upheld it. Animal sacrifice was an essential part of this tradition. When the Buddha incited the masses against animal sacrifice and criticised the rituals and practices, the Brahmin priests could only denounce him as an atheist and an enemy of the Vedas. They could not suppress his voice.

Buddha's sustained campaign against these traditions brought about a change in Vedic practices over the years. He attacked the concept of Soul or Supreme Soul, which was at the heart of Vedic tradition. 'What is this Soul you talk about, is it the Self that exists within each of you? It comes into existence in your body when you are born, it grows with you, and ends when you die. It

is foolish to say that this Self is immortal and will exist always,' he said.

Since the Soul itself does not exist, the concept of the Supreme Soul is irrelevant, he said. Look at the world around you. The elements in it are born, change shape and finally die - this is a constant process. What is hidden and invisible takes visible shape for a time and then becomes invisible again. Where does the Supreme Soul feature in this scheme of things?

The Buddha would poke fun at those who spoke of merging with the Supreme Soul. The Sun and the Moon are visible entities. Can you merge with them? If you cannot merge with what you can see, how will you merge with something that is invisible, he would ask.

The common people saw reason in his words. They began to modify themselves and redefine their thoughts. The priestly class no longer held sway over them.

While the Buddha created an upheaval in society, Mahavir was unable to do anything of this sort. The upholders of Vedic tradition were wary of Buddha's influence, but they weren't bothered with what Mahavir had to say. Disheartened by the growing influence of the Buddha, they realised that there was little they could do, so they lay low while he was around. Once the Buddha attained Salvation, the 'Sangha' or organisation of his followers split into two. New sects sprang up giving new form to his teachings and one day he was elevated from the human to the divine, with his image being worshipped and rituals designed for this purpose. The Buddha had moved away from all that he originally stood for.

It was at this time that the Vedic tradition appropriated the Buddha and established him as an 'avatar' or incarnation of Vishnu. There were many other incarnations revered by the people; one more name didn't matter at all. If the Buddha had remained a separate seat of influence, who knows what further upheavals he would have created in society? By incorporating him as one of their own, the upholders of Vedic tradition neutralised his capacity to be a check on them, making him powerless and incapable of any harm.

The established tradition, and those who are in power, have always behaved in this manner. The 'rebel' is given an important post, and his followers are seduced into their folds. Gandhi is in danger of being treated in such a fashion, today.

"They know that I choose to play with fire ...if they set me free, I will play with fire, again." "I have given you this divine weapon, '*satyagrah*' or 'non-violence', not only for attaining freedom from foreign yoke. You must protect this *swarajya* zealously. If those who are elected to positions of power become intoxicated by this freedom and unleash atrocities on the common people, you must use this weapon to strip them of their power." Gandhi, the rebel, who spoke these words, is not presented to the people these days.

Though each man believes that his own religion is the truest and the best of all faiths, his experience is incomplete. In this land of many religions, the followers of different faiths must get to know each other. They must draw upon the best each has to offer. Only then will that experience be complete." Gandhi, the activist, who strove for social betterment is not remembered these days.

"Without a market free economy we cannot hope to eradicate poverty in this land." Gandhi, the thinker, who had clear opinions on economics, is largely ignored these days.

If people get to know what Gandhi really thought about different matters, they might not accept the present situation in such a docile manner. One wonders if that is why Gandhi is being incorporated into the Establishment today. Gandhi is projected as a part of a coterie, these days. One is the Gandhi-Kinross-Indira-Rajeev coterie, Lohia referred to this sort of groupism as the 'royal establishment', the one in power. Another coterie features Gandhi-Vinoba-Bhave. Lohia referred to this as the 'priestly' group, the leaders of sects. The Gandhi-Vinoba coterie, in Lohia's words is based on their tendency to rebel, which he brands them as 'heretics'.

These days Gandhi can even be seen at the BJP functions!

If we want to save Gandhi from this sorry state, we must take him to the masses. The image of the venerable grandfather or the saint who urged people to stop fighting and spread peace, must be cast away. "Play with fire." "Remove those who are intoxicated with power." "If you cannot turn your other cheek to one who slaps you, then slap him back. Don't just sit there rubbing your cheek." The rebel who urged people to do all this must be introduced to the masses, for this is his true form.

There have been many incarnations of divinity in this land, we don't need any more. We need rebels. Let Gandhi remain a rebel, let us not do to him what we did to the Buddha.

"You should be buried alive!" someone wrote to him in exasperation, a few days before his death.

"Do you want to stifle my voice by burying me?" Gandhi retorted in a reply published in the Harijan. 'You will not succeed. I will continue to say what I have always said, I shall be shouting from the grave'

Can you hear his shouts? Listen carefully. You will hear his words. And then you will get excited. You will not get to sleep.

WHEN GOA WAS AROUSED FROM ITS SLUMBER

Portugal became a Republic in 1910 but the people were unable to make good use of this new found freedom. As a result, in the sixteen years that followed, Portugal saw forty five governments being sworn in with nine heads of State; there were twenty five revolts, and almost three hundred bombs exploded in that time. The Army was the first to react to this situation, and on 28th May 1926, it took control and established a dictatorship in the country. The Army received the support of the industrialists as well as the Roman Catholic Church.

This is known as the 28th May Revolt.

The sixteen years of misrule had ruined Portugal's economy and the Army set about looking for an expert who could bring the economy back on the rails. They found a Professor of mathematics at the University of Coimbra who shared their frustration at the political misrule and advocated dictatorship as the only way to save the country. This man's name was Antonio de' Oliveira Salazar.

Salazar resigned from his professorship and took charge of the country's economic affairs. Within five years he straightened out the economic

mess, so the Army made him the Prime Minister in 1932. I stress this because many people believe that Salazar established dictatorship in Portugal. The fact remains that it was the Army, backed by the industrialists and the Church that did so, Salazar was merely their representative spokesperson. He began to acquire power only after he became Prime Minister but gradually this power increased and in a few years time he became an important member of the coterie that ruled Portugal.

Salazar's government, however, projected itself as a democracy. There was a parliament with a hundred and fifty elected representatives that went back to the people every four years. This was known as the Assembleia Nacional. This parliament did not have the power to enact laws or decide on issues. The government enacted laws and promulgated them with the signature of the President. The Assembleia was expected to merely discuss all aspects of these laws and if necessary, suggest amendments. Once the President passed the law, however, nothing could be done. There was no question of approaching the judiciary to protest against an unfair law because the courts were not independent and would always rule in favour of the government.

There was another organisation called the 'Câmara Corporativa' which comprised traders and industrialists as well as army officers and representatives of the Church. This was also an advisory body, and its members were also 'elected' by the people. Now, who were the people who elected them? Only people who could read and write were allowed to exercise their vote, so more than half of Portugal's population could not exercise their franchise. Of these educated classes, only those who paid a certain amount as taxes were allowed to vote. Their names did not appear as a matter of course on the voting lists. Those who wanted to cast their vote had to make a special application and even then they couldn't be sure because the government often cancelled out names of people who were perceived as being anti-government. The government had the final say on this and many leading professors and doctors and highly educated people who the rulers considered anti-government found their names missing from the rolls.

It was almost a rule that bureaucratic jobs were given only to those who found favour with the government. Thus, after being eliminated at various stages, only a small percentage of people had voting rights, so the candidates who stood for the elections were almost always elected unopposed. It is generally expected that a minimum of two parties are required in an election, but in Portugal the ruling party, the 'União Nacional' was the only one in the fray. Those who opposed its policies worked underground or carried out their activities from bases in France, England or Algeria.

When the government realised the need for another political party they formed one with members of the erstwhile ruling family. The

ocrats were careful not to take any steps that might reflect badly on their own interests. So they provided only token opposition and went along with the government on every issue.

Once the date for the election was notified, the candidates could canvass votes for forty days. They were not allowed to deface walls with slogans or posters, nor were they allowed to see the voter's lists. There was no system in place for a secret ballot, nor was there any rigid security during the casting of ballots. Many voters chose to stay away from the polls and the government considered such absentees as having voted for the ruling party.

General Carmona was the Head of State for many years. When he died, the government called for an election to choose a new Head of State. Salazar proposed the name of General Higino Craveiro Lopes as his candidate while Professor Rui Gomes and Admiral Quintão Meireles were other names in the fray. Rui Gomes had achieved international renown as a mathematician, but since he was known to oppose government policies, he was not allowed to stand for elections, and his name was removed from the voter's list. This made Quintão Meireles nervous and he withdrew his name, so Higino Craveiro Lopes was elected unopposed.

[People in Goa knew this man very well, as his father General Craveiro Lopes was the Governor of Goa. He would often create a ruckus in Panaji those days and many people have been involved in altercations with this 'white-skinned ruffian'. Rajabab Hedo threw him down on the road during a fight. His father got so fed up of his ways that he sent him off to become a man as Governor. This man was now the Head of State.]

The Second World War ended in 1945 and the map of the world was transformed. Hitler committed suicide and Mussolini was hanged upside down from a tree by his own countrymen. It didn't take Salazar long to realise that the days of dictatorship were over and that colonies in Asia and Africa would soon shake off the European yoke. Portugal had eight colonies in these two continents. Though Salazar had no great love for democracy, he decided to don a democratic mask in a bid to retain these colonies.

He abolished the 'Acto Colonial' and changed the very character of the state of Portugal. The name Portugal signifies not just the European nation that bears this name but also includes the eight principalities of Cabo Verde, Guinea, São Tomé e Príncipe, Angola, Mozambique, Goa-Daman-Diu, Timor and Macau, he said. These are not Portuguese colonies but essential parts of the nation, so they came to be known as 'Portugal Ultramarino' or 'the Portugal beyond the sea'.

England and America supported Salazar in this endeavour. England did so because it didn't want to upset its trade ties with Portugal while America wanted to exploit the uranium mines in Angola.

Salazar granted us many rights. He also passed ordinances that made it impossible for us to exercise those rights. He granted us permission to

start newspapers and journals and to write in them. But all that was written had to be shown to the government before publication and a Censor Board was established for that purpose. Most of the members of this Board were from the army. In Goa there were also a couple of 'Brown Sahibs' or locals with European aspirations, and one of them was a Hindu.

The Censor Board expunged any matter that seemed critical of the government. Sometimes they couldn't understand a French or English term so they merely chopped it from the text. (Tristaõ da Braganca e`Cunha had a bad experience of this sort.) If the government wanted something published, it would notify the publication, and if the publishers refused to comply, it would merely shut it down.

In 1937 someone flung a bomb at Salazar. All the newspapers and journals in the Portuguese empire criticised this act (and offered thanks to God for saving his life). The only exception to this rule, despite an explicit order to do so, was Venkatesh bab Sardesai's Marathi Periodical '*Prakash*'. Luis de Menezes Braganza was a regular contributor to this journal and Venkatesh bab would do nothing that would tarnish his image. The government clamped down on '*Prakash*'. Most Goan journalists had bitter experiences of this sort and suffered insults and humiliation; perhaps no journalists in other parts of the world have ever been subjected to treatment of this sort. Yet Goan journalists suffered in silence.

In 1944-45 some officials hatched a plan to forcibly convert a Hindu girl from Cuncolim in South Goa to Christianity. The girl studied in a convent in Margao, and along with other subjects she also received instruction in Christianity. The convent authorities saw the effect this instruction was having on her, and decided to go ahead with this plan. When her family heard about this, they rushed to Margao and took her home. The government officials in Sashti were furious. The President of the Municipality, the Commandant of Police and the Administrator of Sashti taluka rushed into her house in Cuncolim, and forcibly carried her away in broad daylight. No one in Goa had the courage to protest against this atrocity and the Censor Board ensured that the incident was not even mentioned in the newspapers.

Such incidents were not confined to Goa, no one had the freedom to write what they thought in Portugal, either. Goans would go to Mumbai and organise protests and write against these atrocities. Freedom fighters of Portugal would organise protests and write about these atrocities from their havens in England and France. Professor Rui Gomes was a Portuguese freedom fighter. He wrote an article about the winds of change that had begun to blow after the Second World War and demanded that Portuguese nationals should be given civilian liberties. The article was confiscated by the Censor Board and Professor Gomes was thrown into jail as punishment for having dared to make such a claim. It must be noted that Rui Gomes

not an ordinary man but was respected as a great mathematician all Europe. But none of this mattered in Portugal and people lived with hearts in their mouths.

Salazar started another agency called PIDE, on the lines of Hitler's G-10. This agency had such extensive powers that even the ruling regime referred to it as 'the government within the government.' It could arrest people without a warrant, lock them in jail for long periods, and subject them to beatings and torture. If someone died in jail because of these atrocities, the agency had the power to bury the corpse or throw it into the sea without even informing the families of the victims.

Neither the judiciary nor the government had any control over PIDE's actions. It was only answerable to Salazar himself. The agency didn't need any concrete reason for making an arrest. Mere suspicion or a complaint by a mischief maker was enough to have someone clamped in handcuffs and bars. Many people were picked up by the agency on the basis of mere suspicion and they never returned home. Some might have been executed by death. Others might have wasted away in concentration camps like Sagres and Saal, which were feared as 'prisons in which inmates were taken to death'.

These were the political conditions in which we lived. Our hands and feet were tied, our lips were sewn together and the political powers grabbed by the scruff of our necks. We tried to scream but no sound escaped our throats. We could see the traffic pass on the highway but no one spared us a glance.

In the eighteen years of Salazar's rule, only one man's gaze fell upon us and that man was Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia.

Hardly had he set foot on the Goan soil, something akin to a sudden break of a storm with furious winds in tow causing huge age-old trees to sway to breaking point, and then get uprooted and fall off - some such thing unexpectedly happened.

'Nothing at all is going to happen in Goa'; 'None will dare touch the Portuguese.' Goans are good for nothing creatures ... They won't be able to do anything' - there existed across the villages of Goa, a number of such pillars of doom entrenched like ancient trees in faithlessness and hopelessness who believed such things. These were dashed to the ground in a jiffy. And, the four hundred and thirty six year old, slothful, worthless, and, self-demeaning and helpless Goa just vanished into thin air like the blossom of a cotton bud.

In the period spanning from 18th June, 1946 to 19th December, 1961, hundreds of Goans have risen in revolt like burning ambers. For eight and nine years at a stretch, they have been incarcerated in the jails at Aguada or Sagres Magos in Goa; have also braved the Portuguese Prisons at Peniche

and Angola, and so many have chosen to embrace martyrdom.

Such have been the sacrificial pyres wherein I have been forged in shape. The kind of fiery education I received on this battleground could not have come my way in any university of the world - native or foreign.

I have been formed by the struggle for Goa's liberation.

WARDHA – AN INSPIRATION

If anyone referred to me as a Hindu in those days, I would get infuriated though it were an insult. I was born into a Hindu family, I would say, but I have progressed and grown in stature since then. I am a 'universal human being' now, and refuse to be limited by the tag that merely identifies me as a Hindu.

That was how things were in that age. Most of the young people of my generation did not believe in god or religion. Some of them read Ingersoll, Bertrand Russell and Bernard Shaw, and considered themselves as rationalists. Others swore by M.N.Roy and his tenets, while I corresponded regularly with R.D.Karve a rationalist from Maharashtra. If a proposition did not stand the test of reason, we would reject it immediately, no matter how attractive it seemed or how many eminent personalities spoke up on its behalf.

I must have been about twenty year old in those days. My 'rationalist' tensions were put to the test four or five years later, at the time of my marriage. I did not consider myself a Hindu, so how could I marry through Hindu rites? I told everyone that I would not have a priest in attendance, there

would be no 'homa' or sacred fire, I would not tie a string of black beads around my bride's neck – in fact I would do none of the things that carry religious sanction. Yet, I couldn't take the bride home without something that would ratify the marriage, so I decided to have the marriage registered.

I knew that the registry marriage was conceived so that couples belonging to different faiths could circumvent the religious hurdles in the path. It didn't apply in our case because we shared the same religious and social background, but I couldn't think of any other method.

I had just begun to get acquainted with Kakasaheb Kalelkar in the first few days and wanted to spend my time in serving my country, like he did. I invited him to the wedding. My bride and I were asked to fill up a form for the occasion and I specified there that I did not consider myself a Hindu, a Muslim, a Christian or a Parsi – that I did not believe in any religion. Kakasaheb was one of the witnesses to the wedding, so he happened to see what I had written when he was asked to sign the form.

'Why don't you just state that you believe in all religions?' he asked.

'I really don't believe in any religion. Why should I write something the contrary?' I protested.

Kakasaheb realised that there was no point in arguing with me at that point, so he merely signed the form. Later, while addressing the gathering, he touched upon my beliefs and suggested that there was another path where all faiths could be treated as equals. My father seemed to relish his words. I could hear him exclaim 'Bravo!' in Portuguese from time to time.

None of this had any effect on me, though. I don't believe in the existence of god or in god, in sin or in blessings earned through good acts, in heaven or hell. All religions are false and ought to be done away with, so, to a certain extent I can say that all religions are equal, I said to myself. But Kakasaheb's reasoning is different. He states that all religions are as good as his own faith, so all religions are equal in his eyes. I prided myself in being more rational and intellectual than Kakasaheb in this regard.

I set off for Wardha after a few months. I planned to stay there for a year or six years trying to acquaint myself with Gandhiji's philosophy. Prayers were held in the ashram every morning and evening, but unlike the monasteries in other ashrams where attendance is compulsory, they seemed quite optional at Kakawadi. Yet, I made it a point to attend the evening prayers every day. I didn't believe in prayer, I didn't feel the need for such an exercise, nor was it compulsory for me to be there – yet, I went without fail. This was because bhajans were an essential part of the prayer meet and I was Secretary at Kakawadi, Amritlal Nanavati, was an accomplished singer who was familiar with the bhajans rendered during the arati at the Ganesh Chaturthi in Goa, but those were full of musical flourishes with a cacophony of various musical instruments; Nanavati's rendering was

otion. My heart seemed to sway blissfully and float in the supercharged sphere.

My heart craved music in those days and Nanavati's recitals satisfied me. I'd remember the bhajans of Dilip Kumar Roy that I'd heard in Rancherry and the Rabindrasangeet I'd heard in Shantiniketan at such times.

One day I told Kakasaheb that I appreciated the shlokas recited on *pradnya darshan* at the evening prayers. Man's intellect should be steady at all times, he should not be carried away by happiness or dejected by sorrow, he should not be a slave to anger or let irritation wrest control of his faculties – all these are tenets preached by the rationalists and so I was comfortable with them, I said. I couldn't understand or appreciate any of the 'Al Fateha' from the Koran, but I enjoyed their music, and Nanavati's renderings of the bhajans of Mira, Kabir and Nanak elevated me to a state of bliss. So, despite the fact that I didn't believe in religion, I used to be a part of the evening prayers. What irked me most, however, was the chanting of the 'Sri Ram Jai Ram Jai Jai Ram' mantra. Couldn't it be removed from the proceedings, I asked, but Kakasaheb refused.

'You are such an intelligent person, how can you be so obtuse in this regard?' I asked. 'This Ram cut off Shambuka's head though he was not at fault. He banished Sita to the forest when she was pregnant. He was a wicked man who wanted people to consider him heroic and sing paeans to his glory ...how can you praise someone like him?'

'The Ram we hail is not that man. We glorify Ram who is God, who is Krishna, who is Christ ...the Supreme Spirit that is formless. ...' Kakasaheb said.

'Isn't that a delusion?' I asked.

'Do you feel that God is a delusion?'

'Yes.'

'Do you believe in Truth? In the common good?'

'There is no man on earth who doesn't believe in Truth. And yes, I believe in all that is good,' I said.

'Are you prepared to make sacrifices for Truth?' Kakasaheb asked.

'One should be willing to sacrifice one's life for Truth. I don't know if I am ready for that, I'll only know when I'm put to the test,' I remarked.

Kakasaheb seemed satisfied with my answer, the 'teacher' in him emerged, and he began to explain how Gandhiji, who used to claim that Truth was Truth, in his later years claimed that Truth was God.

'When the first Sarvodaya meeting was organised at Sewagram there was much debate on Gandhiji's view that one who doesn't believe in God is not worthy of being a satyagrahi. The discussion was carried out in English, for many outsiders had come to attend the meeting. When I rose

to speak I added another 'o' to the word 'god' in Gandhiji's statement and said that whoever believed in the good, the moral, the auspicious was qualified to take part,' Kakasaheb said.

This didn't answer my question so I continued in the same vein. 'It is mere quibbling with words, whether Truth is God, or all that is auspicious and morally good is God ...this is designed to keep people quiet, it does not clear one's doubts. Why should we believe in God, I don't understand ...' I said.

Rehanaben, who was like a present day incarnation of Mirabai, was listening to our conversation. 'Don't you believe in God?' she asked.

'No.'

'Do you know God? If you don't, how can you say that you don't believe in Him?'

I had no answer to that. No one had ever told me that in order to make the choice between believing in God and not believing in Him, it was necessary that I first get to 'know' Him.

One day S.K.George came to see me at Kakawadi. I had just read a book 'Gandhi's challenge to Christianity' and wanted to translate some excerpts into Konkani. I didn't know that he stayed in Wardha. So I was pleasantly surprised to see him at my door. His humility and his pleasant nature drew me to him and we became good friends. His organisation 'Fellowship of friends of Truth', sought to bring people of different faiths on to a common platform to remove the hurdles that kept them apart. Gandhiji had expressed the need for such an organisation during his travels in Noakhali, and Horace Alexander and a few friends had started the Fellowship with Gandhiji's blessings. George was the Secretary of the organisation and he wanted me to join as well.

I told him that I had nothing to do with organised religion. 'The atrocities that have been committed in this country in the name of religion in recent years make me feel that the only way to unite people is to organise a revolt against all known religions. We must tear down the walls built by these religions if we want to bring people together. No organised religion teaches people the essence of humanity, Hinduism doesn't, of this I am convinced. So, how can I be a part of your organisation? I shan't be of any use ...' I said.

George was quite upset by this argument. 'It's quite immaterial whether you believe in religion or not. You must admit, though, that those who believe in Hinduism, Islam and Christianity must be brought together on a common platform. It's easy to get Hindus to associate with other Hindus or to get groups of Brahmins to work together. It takes an effort to get Hindus and Muslims, Christians and Muslims or Christians and Hindus to come together. Besides, we need a free thinker like you in our group. Even Kishorelal bhai attends our sessions once in a while.'

Kishorelal bhai Mashruwala was one of the six or seven eminent persons who formed Gandhi's core group. His books '*Jeevan Shodhan*' and '*Samooli Jit*' had impressed me greatly and I was reading his '*Ahimsa Vivechan*' at that time. The strength of his convictions and his intellectual integrity led him to cross swords with Gandhiji in the past. Kakasaheb had told many stories about this man, though I had never met him. The desire to meet Kishorelal bhai and observe him from close quarters made me join George's organisation and attend their meetings every fortnight.

I'd come to Wardha only because I wanted to gain a wide range of experience in different fields. It was here that I was introduced to Quaker philosophy and to Sufism, but what I enjoyed most was my acquaintance with Udayal Malik. He was pure and unblemished in his dealings as any young man, and his laughter and love for mischief found reflection in his childlike innocence.

'A child's world is the abode of God. In this world there are no kings and no commoners, no differences based on class or colour of one's skin. All of us are God's children...' he often said about this world in which he chose to live. A picture of Malik ji appears before me when I think of an ideal worshipper of God, and I am filled with joy.

Malik ji told me many stories about Rabindranath and Charlie Andrews. The devotion in his eyes when he spoke of 'Gurudev' convinced me that the devotion to Rabindranath, was much greater than what I had gathered from his work. A mere poet, no matter how eminent he was, could never evoke such devotion in the heart of someone like Malik ji. There must be something more in Ravindranath's personality that was so attractive.

It was Malik ji who sowed the seeds of admiration for Ravindranath in my mind. Kakasaheb nurtured my fascination for the poet, and today my appreciation of Ravindranath's personality and his work is like a full grown tree that occupies a large part of my sensibilities.

Malik ji often found new meaning in the alphabets, which seemed to speak to him. Once, on catching sight of the initials in C.F.Andrews' name he remarked, 'He was Christ's Faithful Apostle', and I must say that no description could have better suited that man.

When Malik ji was invited to a Hindu home for a meal one day he stood in the kitchen stroking his beard and said 'Is there place for a Muslim in this Pak-stan of your's?' thereby punning on the word 'pak' which also denotes 'a site for culinary delights.'

Let me narrate an incident that occurred some years later. Malik ji was visiting a school in Philadelphia some time in January. When the children saw this old man with his long white beard sitting on one of the benches they were reminded of Santa Claus. 'Ah Santa Claus, you are late!' they screamed, tugging at his beard as they flocked about him.

'My face ached for the next three days ...' Malik ji said to us.

What I gained the most from my association with this Fellowship was the close ties I developed with this saintly personality. He inspired much respect in me that I never hesitated to bow down and touch his feet whenever I met him, whether it was in the Fort area of Mumbai or Delhi's Connaught Place.

Many eminent persons addressed the meeting of the Fellowship. Bhagwan Anand Kausalyayan spoke on Buddhism one day, while Rasool Ahmed 'Abul Kalam' spoke on Islam. I found nothing new in Bhadant Anand's discourse because I had read Dharmanand Kosambi's dissertation on this subject, but Abul Kalam's speech created a great impact and I began to look at Muslims and Islam in a new light since that day.

There is no other faith that is as simple and basic as Islam, I feel today. This is the reason why Islam has produced so many Auliyas or holy men, more than any other religion in the world. These holy men bear distinctive names; why should a faith that has produced someone as pure and holy as Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan feel the need for distinctive names?

Whatever be the relationship between Sikhs and Muslims in present times, it is important to remember that the foundation stone of the Golden Temple in Amritsar was laid by a Muslim Auliya. It is unfortunate that our knowledge of this simple and basic faith is so limited.

My views on Pakistan, too, have undergone a change. The Muslims of Pakistan are not descended from those who live in Arabia or Persia or Egypt. They share ties of blood and culture with us. Class differences exist there just as they do in our country. They have many linguistic groups, like us. We wear the same clothes, eat the same food and most important, share a common musical tradition. The only factor that separates us is the vast chasm that has developed between our hearts. This division was not created by religion but by political machinations. Kabir had started the process of bringing the two faiths together. This process should have been carried forward but our political masters betrayed us

I have only one problem with Islam. It skirts the field of spiritualism and delivers concrete tenets for every aspect of life. This has resulted in Muslim society becoming rigid and orthodox and resistant to change.

It is time for the people of both religions to look at our problems in a new way. Irrelevant factors should not be allowed to tarnish a simple and basic religion like Islam. This faith, which gives no importance to caste or class, to tradition or to geographical boundaries, should be allowed to flourish and give a new meaning to life all over the world. But this faith has been married to 'force' and 'political power' right from the start. This, I feel, is its greatest drawback.

Perhaps Indian Muslims can fashion a new Islam. The Muslims of Arabia and Pakistan are powerless in this regard, so are the Muslims of atheist Russia.

h Muslims must give their faith a new direction for they have a secular sphere here and can bring about a change.

I discussed these aspects with Abodh ji that day. I'd never heard of Weber or known of a discipline called Religious Sociology until that day. Today I understand that any discussion on religion cannot be separated from sociology. There is much work that needs to be done.

George came up with a new plan, one day. He decided that henceforth Muslims would speak about Hinduism, Hindus would speak on Christianity, Christians would discuss Islam. Everyone talks about his own religion in a particular manner but his attitude changes when he talks about another religion. In this way we shall get to know how others view us and our faith. All religions are based on ideal principles, but religions have been shaped by history. Many unsavoury practices and rituals have thus been incorporated over the years and these can only be identified if objective outsiders draw attention to them, he said.

Everyone agreed with his suggestion and we listened to lectures and took part in the discussions that followed. I have taken part in many discussions and moderated quite a few myself. Most people who take part do so to score debating points or to out-shout each other and to show their opponent in a poor light, as though this is a wrestling bout conducted through the medium of words. The discussions at the Fellowship, however, were conducted in a congenial manner. Each person was encouraged to speak his mind and people strove to understand different points of view. No one tried to hurt another's sentiments nor did anyone take offence at what was said. There was no attempt to score points or to defeat anyone. All of us worked together to seek the Truth.

This method of speaking the Truth and of gleaning facts through free and frank discussion was new to me and I was slowly getting accustomed to this process. One day George turned to me and said, 'This free thinker has been attending our meetings for a while now. He says nothing, doesn't take part in the discussion, just sits there quietly. We must get him to speak.'

At this G. Ramchandran, who was opposite me, announced 'He'll speak at the next session.'

I was taken aback. I told them that George knew my views, that I didn't believe in God or religion, but G. Ramachandran was adamant. 'You have a good topic to speak about. Tell us why you don't believe in God or religion,' he said.

I looked around hoping that someone would save me from this predicament, but no one did. So I set about preparing my discourse. I was aware that I would be addressing a gathering of intellectuals. It would be like taking an examination so I wrote out the whole speech and told myself

that I would have to pass.

I touched upon the origins of each religion and the age in which one was conceived. Then I showed how social norms changed through ages causing religions to change as well. If we consider chants, incantations, magic potions and other such early medical practices simplistic and outdated, we should also discard concepts like Heaven, Hell, God and the Spirit as outdated relics of bygone times, I wrote. Religion has no place in our quest for Truth, and we don't need threats to goad into following a moral path. I described how various religions had terrorised and intimidated people, how the common people remained ignorant and how certain selfish sections benefited from this state of affairs. I illustrated the speech with examples to prove my point.

I read out this speech at the meeting and many people took part in the discussion that followed. Kishorelal bhai summed up the proceedings. 'There are some intellectuals who are even more devout than those who openly profess to be so. These people are followers of Truth, willing to make sacrifices and lay down their lives for this cause. They believe in virtue and the good of humanity. They don't believe in God but they preserve his throne. They merely replace God with someone or something else to take his place on that throne,' he jeered.

Kishorelal bhai spoke of a Gandhian named Gora who lived in Vijayawada. He followed all of Gandhi's dictates except for his insistence on prayer and devotion to God. He was an austere person, clear of head and committed to Gandhi's cause. He lived in poverty and though he was a Brahmin, he had given his daughter in marriage to a Harijan. He believed that the pressure exerted by religious beliefs had to be removed before any attempt at upliftment of Harijans could be made. Gora had written a book *An Atheist with Gandhi*, and Kishorelal bhai had written an introduction to it. He'd mentioned there that some people tend to mispronounce words — 'station' becomes 'istation', 'stri' becomes 'ishti' in their hands. Sometimes this mispronunciation leads to an inadvertent change of meaning as when 'spasht' or 'clear' becomes 'aspasht' or 'unclear'. Taking this argument further Kishorelal bhai said that some intellectuals couldn't pronounce 'theos', they kept harping on the word 'atheos' instead.

Kishorelal bhai turned towards me. 'Don't accept anything that goes contrary to your reason. But don't forget that some experiences cannot be explained by reason. In such cases it is necessary that you test the situation very carefully using your intellectual faculties and when you arrive at an answer stick to it in a steadfast manner.'

No one agreed with my line of reasoning, but nevertheless, I passed the test.

Kundar Diwan, the publisher of Vinoba's journal 'Sevak', became a good

ad of mine in Wardha. He translated my speech into Marathi and
ished it in the journal. Vinoba read the speech and referred to it while
ressing the gathering after the morning prayers.

Some rationalists display a streak of ignorance when they insist that
tever cannot be explained by their intellect cannot exist in this universe.
y to them – take a look at the size of your skull, first. Then look at all
t you have crammed into your brain. To insist that one will only accept
t passes the test of one's reason is not intelligence. 'I would consider it
olly ...' he said.

Many people thought it strange that though I lived in Wardha I made no
ort to meet Vinoba. But I didn't think it was strange. Vinoba was like the Sun,
d as he said himself, one should worship the Sun from afar, if one goes too
se one might be burnt to ash. So I stayed on the fringes listening to his
eches and reading his articles, unable to summon up the courage to move
ser. However, I got close to him in another way.

I couldn't sleep that night. I began to examine the size of my brain and sift
ough all the contents that I had crammed in it.

When we went to George's house we were welcomed with a drink of
erbet' and then the prayers began. Chants of 'Om Shanti' were followed
ten minutes of silence during which each person was free to pray or
editate in his own way.

This was a new experience for me. I'd seen more than a hundred people
n in collective *dhyān* at the the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry, but
was experiencing this process of silent meditation for the first time at
orge's house.

I said no prayers, nor did I know the ones that were chanted at Kakawadi.
s, as soon as the chant 'Om Shanti' fell on my ears, I'd shut my eyes and
ained silent. I didn't say anything in my mind either, so I could only
ut impatiently for the ten minutes to pass. One evening, as I sat with
y eyes shut, I suddenly became aware of the hectic prattle that my mind
s indulging in. It flitted from one thought to another like a frivolous
onkey jumping this way and that, without pausing to consider or to plan
I was glad that this impetuous prattle was confined to my brain and
dn't find release in words.

I began to pay attention to this silent prattle. Some thoughts were
gemental, as though they were proclaiming a set of beliefs and meting out
ishment to anything contrary. Some thoughts revolved about a certain
ea and continued to build it up. Some thoughts had been submerged in my
nsciousness, and I was becoming aware of them for the first time.

I began to observe this silent prattle. Some thoughts had mounted, as it
ere, the Judicial seat, and prescribing that 'this should be thus', 'that
ould so', were conferring punishment to all and sundry. Some thoughts,
rrying repressed desires piggy back, were afloat; some others were engaged

in a tussel. Suddenly, I found myself delivering a speech to a meeting of million strong people. Midway through, I went for a walk with another wife; suddenly I threw open somebody's door.

In between, I gave up my home and hearth, and went away.... Be somebody blue and black....

I had never believed that there would be so much commotion in my mind. I had thought that I was 'normal'. But whatever went on in my head could not be considered normal. This realization was indeed enlightening. I observed that what I did not speak was hundred times more than what I spoke, and all this revolved simultaneously within my mind. I began to feel intently that this must be resolved.... All this mental turmoil, this commotion has to be calmed down.

Now I was intently keen on calming down my mind.

And for the first time I realised the significance of prayer.

After this, I began to pay careful attention to the prayers at Kakawadi. And once the prayer was over, I would experience a cleansed feeling as though after bath.

I would often say, God alone knows whether there is God. And if he is there, then who knows whether there's the need to think of him. But prayer is something Man needs. If one does not like the word prayer, it can be given another name. But in the course of twenty-four hours, an individual needs to keep aside eight-ten minutes to do something to keep his mind at peace. Just as the body needs a bath, the mind too needs one of a particular kind. One has to find some way to meet this requirement.

Until this time, I had been sitting through a prayer and listening to it to fulfil my craving for music. Also, to be afloat in a certain atmosphere which prayer creates. I now began sitting through prayers for quenching a thirst of the soul.

I began to look for a prayer of my own. Carefully read through the *Ashra*, *Bhajanaawali*. Scrutinized the characteristics of the *shitapradnya* and the other ideals portrayed in the *Bhatwatgeeta* - the savant, the *bhakta* (devotee) and the *karmayogi*. I began to select and learn by rote certain slokas and *bhajans* which would nurture lofty sentiments in me. 'Na tvaham kaamaye raajyam' - I do not desire any kingdom, nor the very heaven, not rebirth; let me contribute my humble mite in the alleviation of the grief of the sorrowing and the sick; that is all I carve for! I learnt by heart such kind of slokas and a few *bhajans* like 'Utth, jaag musaafir bhor bhayee', 'shoor sangraam ka dekh bhaague nahim', 'Sabse oonchi prema-sagaai'. Selected a few poems from *Geetanjali* and began to hum those as well. Every morning as I would hum these *bhajans* and songs, the strings of my heart would be attuned to them, and for a while I would afloat in an out - of - this world experience.

One day I was going through the Christian hymn in the Ashram library. When I surveyed the 'Wondrous Cross on which the Prince of Peace died'. I was suddenly struck by the utter hollowness of my own life. What kind of a life am I leading? Eat, drink, sleep and wake - beyond this what else does my life entail? There's not a shred of anything in it which could inspire complete surrender to a grand vision. There is neither risk, sacrifice, not even martyrdom. Nothing whatsoever. I began to find my own life miserable. I also began to feel, that the capacity to do away with this misery did not rest with either wealth, power or knowledge. The hymn began to dismantle. And surrendering in total devotion and humility before the image of Christ on the Cross, I began to chant;

*'See from his head, his hands, his feet
Sorrow and Love flow mingling down,
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet
Or thorns compass so rich a crown?
Were the whole realm of nature mine
That were an offering far too small,
Love so amazing, so divine
Demands my soul, my life, my all...'*

My heart was overwhelmed with feelings and for the first time tears began to gush out of my eyes even without any suffering.

After this experience, I procured the *New Testament*, and read through it. A brilliant personality that strongly revolted at the sight of injustice came face to face with me. The ideal satyagrahi whom I had been in search of, I discovered in Jesus.

One day I asked Kakasabeb, 'what do you feel about Christ?'

His eyes glistened with tears, and he rendered a sermon which was like an ocean overflowing with devotion. I was seeing him speak like this for the first time. That influenced me a great deal.

I thought of Jesus, a carpenter's son who was born in a stable. He didn't live up to the age of forty, yet he's been reigning in people's hearts for the last two thousand years. What is there in his life that continues to inspire humanity? People are born on earth, they die and are forgotten. But this man, who was put to death on the Cross continues to live on, to inspire us with his vision of life.

All the wealth in the world seemed worthless compared to his crown of thorns as I welcomed this towering personality into the deepest recesses of my heart. I'm not a Christian, but Christ is mine, too. Does the fact that he is revered by Christians keep him out of my reach? He is mine, too....

Buddha has always been my inspiration. The intellectual streak in me was nourished by the European Rationalists, but the courage to break traditions and to proclaim my beliefs fearlessly was inspired by Buddha. Atheists, the world over, have been attracted to Buddha.

'No matter how great I am, no matter how sweet my words sound, subject them to the test of your intellect and accept them only if they pass that test', he said. He is the only religious leader to take such a stand.

I have read all the books on the Buddha written by Dharmanand Kosambi. 'Men should stay away from bad deeds, they should adopt good habits, they should keep their minds clear' — these are tenets that appeal to Reason.

'The world is full of sorrow and that sorrow has been created by Man. We can remove sorrow by avoiding extreme emotions, and by following the moral path.' Why should anyone quarrel with such religious dictates?

Buddha's discourses on character are the most attractive parts of his sermons. 'The fragrance of a sandalwood grove or a jasmine bower is carried by the wind in the direction in which it blows. But the fragrance exuded by people with clear minds and strong moral character spreads in the other direction as well.' What a beautiful image this is, an inspiration to all those who aspire to develop their characters. Buddha referred to this 'inner fragrance of character' as '*Seelgandho*.'

Kakasaheb was talking about Gandhiji's book *Mangal Prabhat* one day. 'A man does not develop character and good personality naturally. He must acquire the finer points through sustained effort. He cannot develop a good character merely by being virtuous, he must pass when put to the test. Gandhiji describes this process in this book, you must read it ...,' he said.

I'd read the book but I hadn't considered it in this light. So I decided to read it again.

'Gandhiji exudes an aura of brilliance that is not easily matched by others. You will find the basic strains in this book. He has the moral courage and strength to stand up against the whole world. If we can cultivate even a fraction of that moral strength in ourselves, we should consider ourselves fortunate ...' Kakasaheb declared.

I read the chapters on Truth, Non-violence and other moral principles in '*Mangal Prabhat*' but when I read Gandhiji's thoughts on '*Sarva Dharma Samabhaava*' it was as though a flash of lightning suddenly illuminated everything before me and a bright light shone in my brain.

What do you mean when you say that you are not a Hindu? That you do not agree with all the ignorant practices and falsehoods that have come to be associated with Hinduism today, isn't that so? You needn't disown Hinduism in its entirety just to make that point. Will you disown the

ishads that form an essential part of the Hindu religion? And what of the *Gita*? It is a very fine book that has inspired and given strength to many people. There are many attractive elements in Hinduism which must be preserved. What needs to be removed are certain sociological elements, not the basic tenets of the religion. Why set the whole structure on fire just to smoke out the rats that have taken shelter beneath?

You may declare that you are not a Hindu, but can you remove the Hindu culture and tradition that has shaped your personality? You might say that you don't believe in the concept of states, that you want to be known as an Indian, but can you deny your Goan identity? Instead, why don't you say 'I'm a Goan, but I will not confine myself to these limits. My identity shall expand to embrace the whole nation and even further, I shall be a citizen of the world.' Yet, even as a citizen of the world, you will continue to be a Goan.

Man should not forsake his inheritance. He should clear out the rubbish that has accumulated there and contribute elements that are fresh and add to the **tribute to growth**.

You are a Hindu by birth. You were drawn to Buddhism. You appreciated it and recognised it as a simple and basic religion. You came to be attracted to Christ and made Him your own. So, you are no longer the same person you were at birth. You have grown and developed and become **inclusive in your views**.

Why, then, do you erect this wall about yourself, insisting that you are 'not this' and 'not that'? Why don't you say instead that you bear your own qualities as well as the good qualities of your neighbour. By doing so you will demolish the wall between your own self and the next person, you will become 'inclusive' rather than 'exclusive', you will become a part of the larger scheme of things and everyone else will become a part of you.

Kakasaheb once said, 'All religions are based on Truth, all religions are good, yet each one has its weaknesses. You might see the weak points in another's religion, it is important that you identify the weaknesses in your own religion and work to rectify them. God might have created each religion but it is Man who has tended it ever since. Rain drops are pure and clean when they fall through the air, but they become dirty when they fall to the ground. It is the same with religion'

Today I have no problem in stating that I am a Hindu, and a Muslim and Christian too, for that, I feel, is the most 'rational' approach. When we turn away from religion, we tend to neglect the good aspects of that religion. The unfavourable elements in that religion merely get stronger as the good **elements are overlooked**.

I now came to another problem - that of the mystic aspect of religion. I thought about this very carefully and finally decided that I would accept only those elements that seemed rational, rejecting whatever my

intellect refused to ratify. I decided to ignore what I couldn't understand rather than to express an opinion about them, for I've realised that there are things that I understand today, which seemed quite incomprehensible some years ago. Perhaps these aspects that I don't understand today will become clear in future. Why should I express an opinion on them right now? Today I am not afraid to confess that there are things I do not understand.

It was as though a shower of heat descended from the sky on summer days in Wardha. The sun would rise at about five in the morning and beat down relentlessly throughout the day. Birds died in the heat and people suffered from sunstroke. We remained indoors all day. Curtains of 'khus' grass that hung in the doorway were moistened with water to impart a cooling effect. It was impossible to remain indoors at night, so water would be sprinkled in the courtyard at dusk and then the charpoys would be set out and we would sleep in the open. Even at the height of summer the nights were pleasant and cool.

I would bathe in the evening and around eight thirty, as soon as dinner was over, I'd go to bed. I'd wake up at about three or three thirty and lie there gazing at the star spangled sky. Nature had opened this glorious book before me, but I was like an illiterate person, I couldn't read a word. What a pitiable situation this was, I said to myself.

Kakasaheb was adept at etching prose poems about the beauties of the night sky. His *Jeevanano Anand* has introduced scores of Gujaratis to this marvellous poem etched across the night sky, enthusing them and filling them with joy. He speaks of light and darkness in a unique manner - 'If we accept the premise that a condition in which we see little 'darkness', and a condition in which we see more is 'light', we must accept the thought that in the daytime there is white darkness all around so we see only the sun and the earth. At night there is black brightness, so we see a universe filled with countless suns.'

These words inspired me to get acquainted with this universe and its infinite suns, so I asked Kakasaheb to introduce me to the subject. He agreed to do so every morning after prayers, and within four days he introduced us to the early morning sky in the four cardinal directions.

I could now lie flat on my back and converse with the stars. I could see pictures in the sky and concoct fantastic stories about them. I would immerse myself in the stories and poems written by people from different parts of the world. I now had access to a source of entertainment that was pure and gave me intense joy.

Kakasaheb had introduced me to the early morning sky, but the night sky was different altogether. I borrowed Sir James Jeans' book on astronomy from Kakasaheb's book shelf and learnt the basics before descending deeper

the subject. I read about different stars and how far they were from earth, how big they were, how heavy ... and as I read, I continued to be amazed.

The earth we live upon is so huge! There is so much to see here that one cannot cover the whole earth even if one spends an entire lifetime in sight-seeing. Yet, a single sun can hold up to thirteen lakh earths! A star named Arundhati in the fifth lunar mansion Mrig, can hold two and a half crore suns. The star Parijat in Vrischik is as big as nine crore suns. If one of these stars, which seems so tiny to our eyes, were to be matched in size it would take ten lakh multiplied by nine crore orbs the size of the earth. And Parijat is but one inconsequential star amongst the countless other stars scattered in space.

How far away are these stars?

These distances are not measured in miles but in light years. Light travels one lakh eighty six thousand, eight hundred and twenty miles per second. The distance light travels in a whole year is known as a light year. There are one crore fifteen lakh thirty six thousand seconds in a year. If these two figures are multiplied, the sum that ensues is the number of miles equal to one light year.

The star that is closest to earth (apart from the sun), is 4.27 light years away. If this figure is converted to miles it would read about 25 billion, or 25 thousand million, with twelve zeros behind it. The next star is 8.66 light years away. The star Altair is 26 light years away, Swati is forty and Ardra is two hundred and twenty light years away from earth. Five hundred light years separate us from the star Aldebaran, three hundred from Parijat and six hundred light years stretch between earth and the star Hans-Pucch. These are the stars that are 'close to earth'. Most of the other stars are at a distance of crores of light years from earth.

One can see the 'Aakash Ganga' (Milky Way) in the night sky. This is a conglomeration of some ten lakh stars, of which the sun is an inconsequential part. There are over ten crore such conglomerations or galaxies strung about in space, and the light travelling from one tip of such a nebula takes about fifty thousand years to reach its other side, and ten thousand more lakhs of years before it reaches earth. The constellation Saptarshi (the Plough), bears a nebula of this sort. The light from this constellation takes sixteen lakh years to reach earth. There is another conglomeration of stars between the Saptarshi and Chitra – light takes five crore years to travel to earth from this point.

I would lie awake at night trying to assimilate all these astounding facts and figures. My imagination would strive to embrace the whole ambit of this universe and I would turn breathless with wonder.

As my knowledge of the night sky continued to grow, I became interested in life on earth. It was not merely the artist and the poet in me that was

aroused, the more scientific and visionary elements in my character began to develop. I read Arthur Eddington's *The Nature of the Physical World* and Sir James Jeans' *The Universe Around Us* with care.

I realised that the confidence and authority with which scientists of the 19th century aired their views about the world was missing in science today. Ever since, Albert Einstein appeared on the scene, there is little difference between the scientist's voice and that of the 'illusionists' who consider this world to be an 'illusion'. They accept the existence of Brahman or the 'Supreme Being', but they deny His presence, for He cannot be seen.

Einstein says something similar - when a ceiling fan is operated at full power the mass of its revolving blades decreases. If the speed at which these blades revolve could match the speed of light, i.e. one lakh eighty six thousand eight hundred and twenty miles per second, the mass of these blades would be reduced to zero. In other words, the blades would vanish. They would be present there and they would be revolving to produce energy but the mass would reduce to zero ... 'Brahman' is Truth, all else is false'.

One thing is certain, even as science gazes at atoms and other complex issues, like the sages who composed the *Upanishads*, scientists, too, have begun to regard the world with wonder and awe. I realise to my surprise that Science, which is the basis for Rationalism, is now more humble.

I woke up at daybreak and stared at the sky. The square figure of Bhadrakali was overhead and Devayaani (Andromeda) was close by. I strained my eyes to decipher the nebulae which were faintly visible, and my thoughts began to churn.

The light that falls on my eyes originated seven and a half lakh years ago and travelled at a rate of one lakh eighty six thousand eight hundred and twenty miles per second to reach earth. What was the condition of earth when this light was starting on its journey? I wasn't around, neither were my father or grand father or great grand father. If human beings were in existence at all, who knows what state they were in!

What must be happening on those nebulae at this point of time? We might know only seven and a half lakh years from now, though scientists have not begun to claim that these nebulae are twenty two lakh light years away.

Suddenly it struck me that these nebulae are made up of many such universes like our own. The Sun is an ordinary component amongst the lakhs of stars that make up the Milky Way, and it has a set of planets, as well as the Earth, moving about its orbit. It is possible that a few such suns with their own earths and planetary systems might exist in the universe around the star Devayaani. Science does not deny such a possibility. It is also possible that life exists on many such 'earths' out there in space.

might not be anything exceptional about our Earth, after

Another thought came into my mind. I'd always imagined that this universe was infinite and boundless, but I now realised that it had definite size and a form. The universe is like a disc, or like a balloon, with a diameter of a hundred crore light years. It continues to grow and this diameter doubles in one and a half billion years. This means that one and a half billion years ago this universe was about half the size it now is. My imagination began to travel back in time and as I thought of a diminishing universe, I was faced with the question, what was in existence when there was nothing?

My thoughts took off in another direction. In two and a half billion years, the universe will double in size. The earth travels around the Sun, the Sun travels about some other body in this nebula called Hercules, and the whole system, too, is in perpetual motion. How big will this universe finally become? What exists beyond it? What does all this mean?

Suddenly something flashed for a fraction of a second in my brain. I realised that I understood something but I couldn't explain what it was. I felt like a blind man who could suddenly see everything clearly. The moment of illumination lasted only for a second but I had got my answer. As a child I had heard my father reciting the 'Purushsukta', and suddenly some of its lines came back to me.

I had received a new vision, a new inspiration to lead my life. Iron is able to turn to gold when it comes into contact with the '*sparshmani*' or touchstone; something similar had happened to my life. I was in a sort of ecstasy, and my life changed from that moment. I felt that I was born anew, I had received the gift of a new life and I began to recite, 'Listen, you on earth, I have seen the One who dwells in hallowed space ... I have seen Him approach like a streak of light cutting through the darkness'

A MIRROR TO MY SOUL

I was giving Tobu a lesson in English. I wrote 'anger' on a sheet of paper, and asked him to read it. He did so, and I was getting ready to write another word when he suddenly took the pen from my hand and added a 'd' before the word I had written. 'What does it become, now?' I asked.

'Danger', I said.

'How? Why should the pronunciation of the alphabet 'g' change just because we add a 'd' at the start?' he asked.

I was confused. Why was the English language so capricious, weren't there any rules? Portuguese was more methodical, it left no room for confusion in spelling words. How do children learn English, I wondered. I couldn't remember how I'd learnt the language myself but I must confess that I still refer to the dictionary when I spell 'neighbour', and am always confused by the actions referred to in the words 'push' and 'pull'!

'I'll check that out. You go and play,' I dismissed Tobu and as he rushed away I was reminded of a line I had read somewhere, 'Anger is one letter short

of danger' – a basic philosophy of life.

We Kelekars are a bad-tempered lot, liable to snap at people with reason (or so some people say). Perhaps this is because we were 'bhatkars' or land owners in the past, and could vent our frustrations on the tenants farming our land. We own no land, today. So who do we snap at with impunity, now? We unleash our rage on our wives and the womenfolk at home, caring little for the effect it has on those poor creatures who are devotedly that they may get us as husbands in each of their earthly lives.

I was about eighteen years old when I snapped furiously at my mother one day. There was no one else on whom I could vent my frustration. My poor mother, would silently put up with this outrage. But that day she rebuked me short and told me to count from one to ten. 'Listen carefully. This will help you in life. When you are about to lose your temper, just don't say a word. Keep quiet. Don't take a decision at such a time. Wait till your anger subsides the next day', she said.

My mother had not received any formal education, but like other mothers, she was wise. She'd carried me in her womb and given birth to me, tended me with care for so many years. I've read many books of wisdom, some I haven't cared for, some I haven't understood and today I do not even remember much of what I liked in these books. But I've never forgotten my mother's words, though I must confess that I haven't always abided by them. Some people irritate me so much that I am tempted to strike them, but my mother's face floats into view and I check myself. Sometimes I have spewed angry words in a fit of rage and then I've been contrite, but my apologies cannot wipe away the damage that has been done. I've vowed that I will not repeat this lapse, but though the spirit is willing, the flesh is often weak.

One day a new thought came into my mind. Isn't anger justifiable if one sees an injustice being done? If one remains silent at such a time, one would be like an abetment of the crime. One must get angry at injustice and one must protest at once. It's only the degree of protest, and the manner in which it is executed that should be handled with care. So I gave up the attempt to live a sanctimonious life by stifling my anger and decided that I would be like everyone else.

Buddha declared that Man should absorb good thoughts and assimilate them into his being, no matter where he acquired them. I read the 'Thought for Today' that appears in the *Times* regularly. One day I came across the following lines -

'You consider yourself great and are irritated by other people's shortcomings. If you were truly great they would not affect you. You are imperfect so you are irritated.'

An electric current ran through my body as I thought of the various occasions when I'd been irritated. I'd lost my temper when I saw injustice, true, but the

on also occasions when I reacted angrily because I was frustrated or
one had deceived me causing much loss. I was embarrassed. There
many occasions even today when I feel my anger begin to mount. But
t of my mind speaks up, 'See, you're imperfect ...' it says, and I'm
ned of myself. There's nothing worse than to be humbled in one's
eyes.

's taken me so many years to set up this mirror in which I see facets
y own personality. When I'm sorry or disturbed or elated, I gaze into
mirror and understand myself. I need no other teacher to show me
laws. But it's taken me a long time, seventy or seventy five years.

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MEMORIES OF A TRIP TO RISHIKESH

I'd gone to Haridwar to immerse my mother's ashes in the Ganga. A man doesn't always feel the need to take a loved one's remains to a holy river, for Nature has blessed Goa with a long coastline, and the scriptures maintain that all holy rivers, in any case, merge into the 'sea *saagare*' *sarva* *prerthaani*. But I'd taken my father's ashes to Haridwar, so I decided to do the same for my mother. Especially since her name was Gangabai.

I could have taken the night train out of Haridwar once the rituals were done, but I'm very fond of this region so I thought I'd spend some time at Rishikesh and visit the Lakshmanjhoola and Swargashram as well. I took a bag of coins totalling eighty six rupees, one for each year of my mother's life, and decided to give a rupee each to eighty six of the helpless widows who sat at the Lakshmanjhoola begging for alms. I dropped coins into the palms of one or twelve women before I reached a young widow sitting in their midst. This woman is young and healthy and can work to support herself, she doesn't need alms, I thought as I moved on. Suddenly the young woman sprang up and began to shower abuses on me. 'May you die soon ... may you be damned! May your sister, your mother, your wife ... all become widows and

come here to join us!' she screamed. I was taken aback. No more of that, I thought as I moved away.

A tall, dark sanyasi, around forty years of age, was walking along the front of me. He peered at each of these widows and asked them something. I could make out that he was a Bengali but I couldn't understand what he kept asking them. We walked past the Lakshmanjoola and Swargashraddha and reached the Paramarthniketan where books published by the Gita Press of Gorakhpur were available for sale. I bought a copy of *Ramcharitmanas* and walked out on to the ghat. A series of broad steps descended to the Ganga and a boat ferried people from this ghat to the other side. I saw the sanyasi sitting on one of these steps and went up to him,

'Namaste ji, if you don't mind, may I ask you something? What were you asking those widows a little while ago?' I asked.

'I'm looking for someone.'

'Who?'

'My aunt. My father's sister ...,' he said, and began his tale.

'I was seven when she got married. It was an evil social practice that allowed this thirteen year old girl to be given in marriage to a thirty year old widower. There was a cholera epidemic in the region, some six or seven months after they were married, and the husband took ill and died. His family held my aunt responsible for this misfortune, and turned her out of the house. Now, where could the poor woman go? She returned to her parents' home.

'Her elder brother, my father, was the only person there at that time. He was strict and orthodox in his views and believed that a widow should not cast her shadow on the youngsters in the house. He forced her to shave her head and left her at the Kamakhya temple in Guwahati. But within two months the poor woman made her way back home. She was greeted with outrage by our family members and neighbours, and sent her to the Jagannath temple at Puri, but she found her way back in a couple of months. Exasperated, my father decided to take her to Dwarka, which, unlike Guwahati and Puri was very far away. They would have to travel by train, so it wouldn't be possible for her to walk back home.

'No one knows what happened to her after that. In a few years time everyone forgot about her ... everyone but me. I can still hear her wails as my father dragged her away, her woebegone face swims before my eyes. The wave of rebellion that swept over me as I witnessed this hard-hearted act, is still alive.

'I got a Masters degree in sociology but I didn't want to work or marry or settle down in life. The urge to transform society, and uproot such evil social practices was too strong to let me settle down like other men. My life would be devoted to social causes, I decided, as I joined the Marxist

When the Naxalites ... but after seven years or so, I realised that these movements were not concerned with transforming social practices at the roots level. They were interested in political ends. A change of government would bring about a change in society, new laws would spur emancipation and once the question of hunger and employment was pressed, social ills would vanish, they believed. Gandhism, Socialism, Marxism, Naxalism – in our country, these are intellectual exercises, mere middle-class luxuries. I turned away from society and became a sanyasi.

I've spent the last eight years travelling all over the country, looking for my aunt. I've been to Dwarka, Mathura and Vrindavan, Varanasi and Jagriti; I've visited the homes and organisations set up by various priests and holy men and spoken to innumerable widows between forty five and sixty years of age, but I haven't found her, still. She doesn't let me sit in her lap. I know, I'll find her some day, of this I have no doubt. When I do, I'll stay with me, I'll make up for all the distress she has suffered, I'll atone for my family's sins.'

Tears welled up in the man's eyes as he spoke. This was the first time I saw a sanyasi weep. After a brief pause he dabbed at his eyes and said, 'I estimate that three and a half lakh Bengali widows have made Uttar Pradesh their home. There must be fifty or sixty thousand in Varanasi alone. Every year about ten thousand widows, twenty five to sixty five years old, arrive to swell their ranks. The younger ones don't beg. They work as domestic help or cooks, and some priests even set them up as concubines. Most belong to the Brahmin, Kayasth or the Baidya castes. Only the older widows beg for alms. When they die, their bodies lie unclaimed till the municipal corporation consigns the corpse to the river and the fishes feed on the flesh...'

'I've been moving around here and I've seen widows begging for alms,' he said, 'but one thing strikes me as strange. Why don't we see widows from other regions, why are so many Bengali widows present at these ashrams?'

'This was not the case in the past. It started in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries after two great social activists Raja Rammohan Roy and Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar launched a movement against 'sati', the inhuman practice of immolating a widow on the funeral pyre of her dead husband. The movement was so effective that Lord William Bentinck was forced to ban the practice and punish the offender. They managed to abolish this cruel practice but they couldn't change people's attitudes, and a new practice of abandoning widows in temple towns began at this stage.

'When 'sati' was in force' the poor widow was burnt to death. Now she was abandoned, humiliated and subjected to terrible hardship for as long as she lived. Rammohan and Vidyasagar tackled only one part of this problem successfully. Widow remarriage, which was the constructive side of this movement,

petered out, and later reformers didn't address this issue in Bengal.

'One must generate social awareness about an issue before promulgating laws. And once the law is passed, this movement should be more sustained, otherwise the reforms will fail to take root. A country cannot progress if we concentrate only on economic and political issues. Social issues need to be debated and overhauled, or this progress will remain superficial and without any meaning. But few people seem to realise this.'

The man got to his feet and set off in the direction from which he had come. I crossed the river, took a bus to Hardwar and returned to Delhi.

Fifteen years have passed since this event, but the sanyasi still appears in my dreams. He is accompanied by his widowed aunt, a woman I have never seen. Yet, I see my mother in her person, and my mind is in a turmoil. I cannot sleep after that.

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MEDICAL ETHICS

Bisen ji collapsed just outside the bathroom. There was no sign to show that he was still alive, except for the rumbling sounds that came from his throat. The doctor said this was a case of cerebral haemorrhage, and advised that he be shifted to a hospital at once.

'Is there any chance that he will recover in hospital?' I asked.

'Our medical ethics dictate that we should try till the end,' the doctor said in reply.

He passed away after three days in the hospital.

'It's fortunate that he passed away ... He could have been stuck in that hospital for six months or more ...,' someone said, as we took charge of the corpse.

These 'medical ethics' do not let people die in peace. Doctors continue with the treatment even though it is quite clear that there is no hope of recovery or survival.

Buddha visited Mahakashyap when he was very ill.

'How do you feel?' Buddha asked.

'My body is reacting as it should to the disease.... But the pain is intolerable, Lord,' he replied.

Buddha's advice to Mahakashyap, referred to as the 'Seven *Bodhyangas*' find a place in the *Majhimaniikaya* text.

'Let your mind be fully conscious when you undertake any action. Carefully consider what will be beneficial to you and what will not, before you decide on a beneficial course of action. Be happy and enthusiastic about whatever you choose to do. Keep your head cool and your mind clear and don't be bothered with things that don't concern you. Only then will you be free of your illness,' the Buddha said.

The sutras state that Kashyap followed this advice and in course of time his illness slipped away as smoothly as a dewdrop slips off the leaf of a colocasia plant. He recovered completely and after the Buddha attained *Nirvana* it was Mahakashyap who organised the first '*sangiti*' or meeting at Rajgriha to give Buddha's teachings a concrete shape.

The 'seven *Bodhyangas*' are the teachings of a venerable religious teacher, and the man who acted on them was a devout follower. Our country has also produced a great physician called Charak whose *Charak Samhita* like the *Materia Medica* is a medical treatise bearing details about medicines and treatment procedures for various illnesses. Yet, Charak says that once all modes of treatment have been tried, and there is no hope of recovery, the physician should be frank with his patient. 'We have done all we can, we turn you over to the Almighty, now... Chant the Lord's name. If you are fated to recover, you will. If not, prepare yourself to die in a peaceful state of mind ...,' the physician should say.

Doctors should follow this piece of advice even today.

The doctors of my father's generation generally treated patients who came with complaints like diarrhoea or dysentery, intestinal worms or some such disorder caused by faulty eating. Fevers like malaria, flu or typhoid and afflictions like anaemia and T.B. were also common in those times. Nature often took its own course in relieving these afflictions, and doctors only tried to help Nature along. Today, patients visit doctors with ailments that are a result of the materially progressive life they lead, and these ailments are so complicated that Nature is unable to solve their problems. Doctors are forced to assault patients with a battery of drugs and often the doctor himself is unaware of what components the drug contains. Are these drugs reliable, one may ask. Some years ago penicillin was hailed as a wonder drug and penicillin injections were widely prescribed. Soon, the markets were flooded with spurious penicillin and doctors were forced to import the drug from England.

Unscrupulous men can be found in every field, and they have found a place amongst pharmacists and physicians too. The *Charak Samhita* declares that a good physician is one whose reassuring presence itself cures half

affliction with the patient recovering as soon as the physician holds wrist to check his pulse. He should prescribe few medicines, and advise patient to bask in sunlight and fresh air in a neighbourhood where the air and water have not become toxic and contaminated. He should use the patient to go for a walk in the morning and evening and if health permits, to work in the garden for an hour every day. The physician should advocate a simple vegetarian diet and tell the patient to go to bed early and wake up at dawn. He should also teach the patient the art of living so that his heart and mind remain calm and peaceful.

It happened to meet someone like this at Ghatprabha in Karnataka — Madhav Vaidya, a cheerful physician, who offered modern treatment facilities and conducted operations at his '*Arogya Dham*'. But this was not a conventional hospital. Patients felt comforted as soon as they set eyes on the doctor and they recovered quickly because of his dedicated service as well as the salubrious climate and atmosphere at '*Arogya Dham*'.

We can create such havens dedicated to nurturing good health in each of the eleven talukas in Goa, but our politicians, with their craze for modernity and progress, have turned this 'heaven on earth' into Hell!

I have a suggestion —

A man who is more than seventy years old should not go to a hospital to breathe his last. He should tell his family that his time has come, that his death will not cause any loss to any one, so, no matter what the doctors say he should be allowed to spend his last moments in his own home. He should spurn all offers of intensive care, bypass surgery, oxygen, blood transfusion, dialysis as an insult to his advanced years, as an affront to his sensibilities. Don't kill me bit by bit, help me go in peace, he should say. If I am conscious, tell me clearly that my time has come and let me be free to take the name of the Lord. How long can you keep me alive with all this specialised treatment? Four to six months, or maybe a couple of years? At this age a man should opt for a peaceful death rather than such a wretched existence, and his family and physicians should help him achieve his aim.

OLD AGE

I'd gone to Mumbai.

'There's a peculiar note in your writing, these days', my host Dattaram said to me. 'You keep talking of how old you've become, how you don't have much time left. Get rid of it.'

'Of course I'm old. Should I try to fool myself by pretending that I'm not?' he asked.

'Everyone grows old. But no one makes such an issue of it. When you talk about it, it seems as though you are asking for pity, as though you are telling people not to say and write things that might hurt you.'

It was as though an electric current passed through my body. I was embarrassed and could feel the colour rush to my face as I protested aloud. I could never ask for pity even if my entire world turned upside down. Not even death itself, stood before me. I am not weak and helpless. I have not lived my life on someone else's terms, nor do I want to. I do not want anyone to pity me, not even after I'm dead

I decided that henceforth, I would not talk about how old I'd become.

I set out with Dattaram and took a bus from Shivaji Park. There were few places that I always stopped by at the Fort — places like the Khandobhavan, Strand Book Stall, International Book Stall and the book shop that sprouted on the pavement by the Fountain. This would normally take a couple of hours, and then I'd have lunch somewhere and take the Limited bus back to Bandra. Today, however, I grew quite tired within an hour, and by the time I got back to Bandra, I was exhausted.

This has never happened before, I said to Dattaram. I'd visit the bookshops at the Fort, then I'd go to Kalbadevi, Girgaon or Nana Chowk to check out on what was new in the field of Gujarati and Marathi literature. But today, I was exhausted by the trip to Fort. How could I possibly pretend that I wasn't old?

'All right, then, say what you want,' Dattaram declared, 'changing the topic'.

I know that there is no relation between old age and the number of years one has lived on this earth, for I have seen people who seem 'old' even when they are in their thirties or forties. Then again there are 'youngsters' like Kakasaheb Kalelkar, who even at the age of 90, move about undeterred, taking up new tasks and projects. If you feel old in your heart, you will be old even though you are physically quite young; if you feel young at heart, you will remain young irrespective of your advanced age. So long as you feel young, you are young. So long as you are filled with a desire to do things, to write, to visit distant places, you will continue to be regarded as 'young'. No one who has seen my enthusiasm and dreams, or has witnessed the stamina with which I work for more than ten hours a day, will call me old. Yet ...

Sometimes my mind tells me softly that I have grown old. Man should know how to grow old gracefully, for old age has a 'grandeur' of its own and one's behaviour and activities should complement this aspect. An old man need not degenerate into a pitiful state. When Gandhi was 72, he launched the Quit India movement. He walked to Noakhali at the age of 79. Churchill was a man of advanced years at the time of the Second World War.

Old age is a stage when one no longer lives solely for oneself.

I bought a copy of Ernest Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea* at the Strand Book Stall and finished reading it during the three hours that I spent in Dattaram's dispensary that evening.

It is a simple story about an old man who goes fishing in the sea. After numerous disappointments, a large fish gets caught on his line. The man has to struggle very hard to gain control of the fish. By the time he drags it to the shore other marine animals have ripped the flesh off the fish and he is left with only the bones.

is the effort that matters, not the result — Hemingway says in this that fetched him the Nobel prize. I believe that it is Hemingway's life that one gets to see here. He must have been quite old when he wrote this book. He might have had some unfulfilled desires, perhaps he was upset with life for forcing him to miss out on some experiences because of his advanced age. Perhaps this was his way of fighting against the effects of old age.

Hemingway had an immense zest for life. But he shouldn't have tried to fool himself, I thought. He was a great man. He should have accepted old age with grace.

Dawn, noon and dusk are the three phases that make up a day. Similarly, a man's life is made up of childhood, youth and old age, and each of these phases is equally important. One's childhood was spent in childish frolic but these tendencies fell away as one grew older and new fields of opportunity opened up in one's youth. My childhood was full of joy, my youth was infused with hope and excitement. My old age is content and fulfilled.

I can do what I want, or abstain from doing anything at all — no one controls my actions, no one has any expectations from me. This is the best phase in my life when there is nothing left for me to achieve. I needn't strive for gain or profit. Why should I resent this phase? My heart is filled with immense satisfaction.

I am not affected by people's actions today. I have withdrawn from all my responsibilities and have no desire to know anything about them. I have no ill will towards anyone, even in my youth, nor have I been envious of any man. I have never competed with anyone, nor do I compare myself with others. I have received all the honours society bestows on individuals, in fact, I have received more than what is, perhaps, my due. I am indebted to no one, and no one owes me anything.

When someone seeks my company, I welcome him warmly, as though it were the Almighty who has approached this devotee, and if, through some misunderstanding, someone chooses to stay away, I remain detached and say a farewell. Like all men, I, too, have many faults. If someone were to point them out to me, I'd gladly seize this chance to know myself better, but I wouldn't try to rectify these faults. I'm too old to change, besides, I see no need for that. Accept me, with all my warts, or stay away.

Konkani, which was slighted as a mere dialect with no grammar or script, is now accepted as a language and plays an important role in our lives. It gives me great satisfaction to think that I have helped bring about this change. Few people can claim to see their goals in life fulfilled. I consider myself fortunate to be one of them. How can a man who has reached this pleasant state in life complain about old age? The responsibilities of youth have moved away, but there are new responsibilities compatible with my age. I am sixty six years old today, but

I still spend eight to ten hours a day in reading and writing. I irritate some people, goad others to protest; yet I make them think. I pray that the process of making people think continues till I draw my last breath.

I'd gone to meet Kakasaheb two or three months before he passed away at the age of 96. A young American couple, both of them poets, had come to meet him, too. After an hour or so they rose to go and I escorted them to the gate. Kakasaheb's deep satisfaction and contentment with life could be seen on his face, and the young couple were deeply impressed. 'Today, we have seen a picture of a tranquil sunset,' the woman said.

If there is one wish that I have left, it is this — may the last glimpse that people have of me be like a tranquil sunset, too.

— Dr. B. R. Ambedkar

FOR A CONTENTED LIFE

I had never been to his home before this. We were friends, but we didn't visit each other or indulge in any such social niceties. A youth from the village requested me to put in a word with this man. He's your friend; if you request him, he'll certainly do this for me, the youngster said. What could I say? So, I went.

He was quite surprised to see me, and when I explained what I wanted he readily agreed.

'Don't worry. It will be done,' he said.

'Do it, only if it's possible. Don't put yourself out because I'm making this request ...' I said, but he was quick to reassure me.

We spoke of this and of that, and I could see his anger and resentment begin to mount,

'Once, I was a kingmaker in this region. People consulted me about who should be nominated, how they could win the elections ... but now? No one consults me any more. They don't come to meet me. Politics has passed into the hands of undeserving people ...' he raved.

He mentioned a prominent person's name, 'I made him famous. When he stood for election the first time, he didn't have any money. I paid the deposit on his behalf and took care of all his expenses. He doesn't even recognise me today!'

My friend mentioned another name. 'This man has become very rich now, he feels, he can 'buy' anyone today ...'. He went on in this vein castigating many other prominent persons. I was upset to see how big he had become. He'd always been a nice, cheerful person, willing to help those in trouble. I'd never heard him speak disparagingly about anyone. What had made him so dejected and bitter, I wondered.

When a man is close to sixty, much of his strength and energy begins to decline. He cannot exert himself as much as he used to, and often, the work that he is entrusted with, suffers as a result. His memory begins to fail, he cannot remember names and faces and it is around this time that he retires from service. When he is suddenly set free after a lifetime of work, he doesn't know what to do with his time. The twenty four hours a day seem like twenty four long days. Life seems dull and heavy, and the empty feeling in his heart grows with each passing day.

Unable to dream of a rosy future, his mind harps back to the past and he draws up an account of his life, dwelling upon what he has gained and what he has lost. The deposit column bears many entries — so much that is pleasant and fortunate happened without his having to exert himself, but he doesn't even glance at this. He is bothered about the ambition that he couldn't pursue, the desires that remained unfulfilled, and the reasons why this was so. He focuses on people whom he holds responsible. 'This wretch deprived me of this and this', or 'These people set up hurdles so I had to lose out on this ...,' he rants.

As he approaches sixty years of age, Man's body is already weakening. Retirement seems to weaken his spirit, too. Anger, envy and suspicion take hold of his senses and he begins to rant and rave against others. It is this that makes him bitter.

Confronted by the spectacle of old age, illness and death while still in the prime of youth, Siddhartha was able to shed his pride and gain enlightenment as the 'Buddha'. We are not similarly enlightened. So, even though we know that one who is born will grow old, we continue to consider ourselves young till old age suddenly takes control of our bodies. We know that illness can strike without warning, yet we don't bother about good health till we are struck by disease. We know that all living creatures will die, yet we consider ourselves immortal till death knocks at our door. Other people will die. We shall only accompany the corpse to the crematorium ground, we believe, but can we really expect to escape from illness, old age and death?

We do not see the images that Siddhartha saw, so we do not think about these matters. We don't even think about what we will do after we retire from work. Man should plan his retirement when he is still in service, should try and get used to whatever he plans to pursue in a gradual manner. This is the only way he can escape the feeling of emptiness and rejection that comes when he has to give up his work. We do not prepare ourselves in this way. So, after retirement we spread rancour and ill-will in our surroundings and complain that no one pays attention to us, no one needs our company any more.

I have begun to feel that we should revive the concept of '*ashramas*' or 'stages in life' that our forefathers believed in. This is a scientific system operating on the principle that man needs work to keep himself occupied so that his life does not become slothful and meaningless and of no use to anyone. The *Upanishads* state that Man should work continuously throughout the hundred odd years that should be his life span on earth, this is the only way open to him, the books declare.

So, what sort of work should he do during those hundred years? The books prescribe different forms of work during the different stages of his life. If he is forced to toil in the same manner throughout his life, he comes worn out and dejected and loses all zest. Man should be fresh and energetic till his last moments on earth, and should face life happily. It was with this in mind that our forefathers divided man's life into four stages or '*ashramas*' and drew up a list of work that was to be done at each stage.

The four stages were of equal importance, in principle, but the *grihastashrama* or 'householder stage', which man occupied from the age of twenty five to fifty, received more prominence. At this age man is strong and healthy in body and in mind, and his actions bring him name, fame and power. He enjoys all the pleasures of life and performs various duties. At this age man is filled with hope and aspirations.

The knowledge and skills that are required for leading a successful householder's life are acquired in the previous stage, the *Brahmacharyashrama*, when man is a celibate student. At this stage he is trained to surmount all hurdles in his path, and pursue his goals with single-minded purpose, and these skills form the foundations on which his future as a householder will be built.

Being young is an intoxicating feeling and man is often drunk with power, knowing that he can achieve whatever he wants. This is a necessary part of his growth as a human being, and he should experience it to the fullest. Yet, there comes a time when man should let this frenzy subside and step away from the action. And when should he do that? When he begins to feel tired and craves rest; when he feels satisfied and content with all that he has achieved. There are some people who don't get tired, who are not quite satisfied with their achievements, what should such people do? People such as these should

take heed of another sign — when a son-in-law or daughter-in-law enters their home or a grandchild comes into their life, it is time to step into the *Vanaprasthashrama* or the third stage of life.

I have done all the work and performed all the duties that fell to my lot and earned name and fame in the process. There is nothing more that I want to earn. I want no new responsibilities, no household duties to weigh me down. I will now seek happiness and fulfillment in service, without any expectation of reward. This is the frame of mind that man should adopt when he steps into the *Vanaprasthashrama*, transferring his public duties as well as his domestic responsibilities on to the shoulders of the young generation and stepping away, of his own free will. The vast field of social service lies before him, he can choose the path that appeals to him and render service in an 'honorary' capacity.

Vinoba referred to this stage as 'childhood that comes at the age of fifty-five'. Children are free from worry and commit no sins. Man should revert to this blissful state and live thus till he turns seventy five years old.

And what, after that? Our elders believed that man should forsake his home and society and take *sanyaas*. Some people would wear saffron robes and retire to some ashram or holy city, spending the remaining days of their life in search of God. But man needn't be so harsh with himself and wear saffron clothes. He can adopt the principles of *sanyaas* even as he lives in his own home.

At this advanced age man is naturally aloof and disinterested in most things. For one thing, many of his friends and contemporaries have passed away and his world has closed in. For another, he is acutely aware that a new way of life has developed about him and he has no role to play. If a man accepts this shift in power gracefully without insisting on maintaining control, he doesn't become a burden to his family.

Vinoba maintained that in this phase one's soul should commune with the Almighty, and one should play the role of a reference book in one's home. A reference book explains words and meanings and people refer to it when they encounter words that they cannot comprehend. At this age man should adopt this role, providing advice and guidance whenever he is approached.

This system that was drawn up by our ancestors allowed people to lead contented lives. Each person had a role in society and had specific duties to perform. There was no cause for competition and consequently, there was no cause for discontent. We should revive this system and give it respectability. Complaints about being ignored in old age and of being of no use to anyone will no longer be heard.

Has any young person, faced with the bounties of youth, ever complained that his childhood has come to an end? Why, then, should we complain that our youth has faded and we are growing old? Someone once said that each age has its own pleasures - we were joyous in childhood, we enjoyed the

asures of youth. We must seek the happiness that lurks in old age, not like the mistake of cursing this state. This is the finest and most pleasant age of our lives. Once we get used to this phase, we shall not exchange for youth, it would be like giving gold in exchange for nickel, in our days.

Man becomes alone in his old age as his companions and friends pass away. Yet, if one chooses, one can live with great people like Socrates and Buddha, Gandhi and Rabindranath, Tolstoy and Goethe, Shakespeare and Krishna Das or Vyasa and Valmiki as one's companions. We need only invite them to come and sit by our side and without a moment's hesitation they will come and regale us with their stories for as long as we desire. No one can feel lonely after that.

One must not wait till one is advanced in years to accept old age. Like the Buddha, we should be prepared when we are still in the throes of youth. When old age arrives we shall see the 'grandeur' inherent in that state and then our regret shall be replaced by joy.

IF I COULD LIVE MY LIFE AGAIN

Not only do we lie to other people, we also lie to ourselves.

If someone were to ask us what we would do if we had our life to live again, would we spend it as we had in the past? Would we do something else? Would we give our life a new shape? Most of us would say that we would continue living the way we always had. Even great people have been known to reply in this vein.

If someone were to ask me this, however, my reply would be different. If I could live my life again I would not repeat the mistakes I had made in the past. I would use the experience I had gained to give life a new shape.

It's not that I have any regrets or am ashamed of my life. I have lived freely, with no ties to bind me down. I have done exactly what I pleased, making the best use of every moment. I am content and fulfilled, and consider myself fortunate to have lived such a life.

It was at this time that Goa awakened and I had enough scope to work in many fields. I took part in three movements, each of which culminated in success. I have done nothing that I should be sorry or embarrassed about, and this knowledge makes me content. Yet, if I could live my life

again, I would not live it in the same way. I would not repeat the mistake of the past, though I would be willing to acknowledge them. I might make new mistakes, for that is how one makes progress.

If I were to name one mistake or sin that I have committed all my life it is this — I have had no role in growing the food that I consume, I do not spin or weave the khadi clothes that I wear, I do not make the shoes on my feet, nor have I built the house in which I stay. The comforts and privileges that I enjoy have fallen to my lot because of the backbreaking labour and effort of some other people. And what have I given them in return?

Many people might question this line of reasoning and say, isn't the work you do socially productive? You have written books and articles, taken part in social and literary movements, isn't that important? It is not individual constituents that make up a society, rather it is an amalgamation of elements working together in a mutually beneficial manner. Some grow food, weave cloth, build shelter; you write articles and books and speak out loud so that people are educated and culturally enhanced.

But is this a mutually beneficial social system, or is it mere banditry, I ask. Suppose these people who grow food and weave cloth and build houses turn to me and say, If what you do is so socially productive, we would like to join you, too. Let us read your books and get educated and culturally awakened, first. After that we'll grow food and weave cloth and build shelter.' What will happen, then?

It is true that the various elements that make up society are mutually dependant and beneficial, but this applies to services and products that are of equal value, for instance, a farmer can grow food and give it to a weaver in exchange for cloth. This is only possible if we look at various services that can be classified on an equal level.

My work, however, is different. Writing books and articles and giving speeches is an intellectual exercise, while the work that farmers and weavers and masons do is a more physical one. It is we, the so called 'cultured' members of society with bourgeois pretensions, who declare these two levels of exercise as 'equal'. We have foisted our convictions on these people who indulge in physical labour, and they have silently accepted this classification. So, the masses have followed the classes as it were, and today even they look upon physical labour as demeaning and seek to take up intellectual pursuits.

Today the goldsmith becomes a doctor or an advocate, the artisan forsakes his tools; the farmer feels important discharging a peon's duties, and the mason hires outsiders to work for him instead of exercising his craft.

I would like to uproot this social structure and bring about a parity in different forms of work. Which is why, if I had my life to live all over again, I would inculcate physical labour into my daily routine. I would spend five hours a day working in the fields, spend at least an hour in spinning or weaving, and do all my work myself without passing it on to others. Even

After Rajendra Babu became the President of the country, he continued to wash his own clothes.

Poverty and class divisions continue to plague our society because there is no place for physical labour in our lives. If we want to eradicate these vices and bring about equality in society, we, the 'intellectual' classes should encourage and indulge in physical labour and bring it to a position of prominence.

I do not mean that an artisan should not aspire to a white-collared job. Let him become a doctor or an advocate, a professor or an officer; may he achieve renown as a writer or as a leader in any field. However, let him not forsake the hammer and the chisel, the saw and the plane — let him achieve renown in these fields too.

Gandhi had set down one important rule — he made the Brahmin pick up the broom and take part in cleaning the ashram. He also ensured that the scavengers, who were traditionally entrusted with this menial task, were given an education. Has anyone tried to remove the inequalities of caste and class in this country in a more revolutionary manner?

We have grown up in an elite society comprising people from the upper classes. Our hands are used to rule and subjugate others, our legs are folded beneath us as we sit in comfort. Our tongues bark out orders and indulge in gossip, our eyes gaze at movie screens and theatrical performances, our ears are fed with information about the 'genteel' society that we belong to. This is the established norm today and it is this norm that must be broken.

When Tolstoy arrived at the conclusion that physical labour should become a part of each man's life, he took a hard look at the twenty four hours in a day and the manner in which man spent his time. Eight hours are enough for rest and sleep. Of the sixteen that remain, he might utilise five hours for reading and writing. Five hours spent in such intellectual pursuits are quite enough for man to gain education and read all the great literature that has ever been written. What does man do for the eleven hours that still remain? He whiles away this time in idle gossip and quarrels, song and dance and frivolous pursuits. You can gain more honest pleasure if you spend five hours in the fields engaged in physical toil, he said, and that will still leave six hours for you to while away as you choose.

Tolstoy is one of the greatest writers that the world has seen. He had spent forty years as a writer with over five thousand pages of published literature before he came to this conclusion. If I had spent eight hours working in the fields for all these years, setting aside only five hours a day for reading good books; if I had written only four pages on one day in the week, I would still have managed to complete five thousand pages in less than fourteen years, he writes.

I was jolted out of my complacency when I saw Tolstoy's scheme. What have I achieved in sixty three years of life, I asked myself. It is true that I was

born in an extraordinary age when some unique challenges loomed up before us and we had to surmount them to make any progress. The Konkani language needed a state or region in which it could thrive. The affairs of the state and culture had to be transacted in this language. I was involved in the struggle to achieve these ends and also managed to produce literature in the process.

Yet, the regret that I haven't helped to grow a handful of grain, weave a small square of cloth continues to haunt me. There has been no place for productive physical labour in my scheme of things. I have lived the life of a parasite, unable to return even a tiny fraction of the immense bounties this world has showered upon me.

If I had spent an hour in the morning and one in the evening toiling with hoe and spade, I would have had no need for aimless strolls to counter the boredom I have felt, and most illnesses would have been held at bay. My life would have been touched with gold, like the golden grain I would coax out of the earth.

I am sorry that I couldn't live such a life. Which is why I say that if I could live my life again, I would never shirk physical labour, and pass my share of such work to others. I would give my life a new shape.

I am a Hindu, by birth and by faith, and I believe in rebirth. What I could not do in this life, I shall do in the next. Thirty seven years from now, in the year of my birth centenary, you might see a lover of Konkani toiling in the fields for eight hours a day; you might notice that he spends five hours reading great literature and sets aside a couple of days a week to write steadily. If you notice such a person, who sticks steadfastly to this routine long after I have gone, be sure of this: I have been born again.

SORROW

When Man does not get what he desires, when his plans fail, when he is constantly faced with failure, he becomes tired of life. 'What a wretched life this is!' he exclaims and when he is faced with the prospect of such an existence for a long time, he becomes depressed and sees no meaning in life. 'It would be better if I were dead' he says and even contemplates ways to end his life. Enthusiasm and a zest for life form the basis of human existence and a depressed state of mind affects this zest. Failure is the main culprit that leads to depression. Two other factors that lead to this state are, a sudden destruction of one's hopes and expectations, and acts of treachery or betrayal of one's trust.

I have suffered many failures in life and have been dejected each time. I've even hoped that this life would end at such times. Once, when I was wallowing in depression, a friend barged into the room. He had no idea about my state of mind, 'I've organised an important meeting. Couldn't send a message to you, so I've come to take you. Get ready. Let's go' he said. I would normally have brushed off such a suggestion, but this was a dear friend and a worthy colleague. So I got ready, and we set off at once.

My depression seemed to vanish in a trice.

I realised that day that depression is a false and insubstantial state of being; my imagination had conjured up that mood and I had wallowed in it. This is one of the most vivid experiences of my life. Some twenty five years have passed since that day, and I have suffered many failures and setbacks in all these years. These setbacks have upset me, I have been irritated and given vent to my anger by shouting at others. My angry outbursts have hurt people, and I have often been overcome by the urge to teach someone a lesson. But I have never been depressed since that day. It is as though the feeling of dejection and depression that left me that day has gone for all time. Just as the light from a tiny earthen lamp dispels the surrounding darkness in a trice, a tiny ray of hope can lighten a depressive mood.

There have been many sorrowful incidents in my life, but these moments have passed on. Joyous moments have also come and gone. When sorrow has struck, I have been dejected, but those occasions have never made me lose my moorings. Maybe the sorrow hasn't struck deep enough. Or maybe my attitude towards sorrow helps me control myself.

I read a story in the Puranas about a sage called Markandeya who travelled far and wide over a span of many centuries. He saw the rise and fall of many civilisations and was regarded as a wise and experienced person. Someone once asked him whether the world contained more joy or sorrow. 'I have not seen joy anywhere, it's only sorrow that abounds,' he said.

Most philosophers agree with Markandeya that the world is full of sorrow so they hold forth on various methods by which this sorrow can be removed. Let us turn away from this line of reasoning for a moment and ask ourselves, is it only sorrow that has fallen to our lot? Haven't we experienced joy, as well?

Some people consider old age, illness and death as 'sorrows'. Old age is an inevitable state in human life, but Man has experienced a lengthy span of youthful vigour before arriving at this state. If youth has a place in Man's life, so does old age. Illness, too, is an inevitable part of the human condition. Man isn't struck with illness all the time, he experiences spells of health and vigour too. One must not harp on the illnesses and infirmities of old age all the time, one must accept that there have been periods of intense joy and good health in one's youth. Those who have experienced birth, youth and good health must accept that death, old age and illness are inevitable, too.

It is wrong to say that one doesn't get what one wants in life. We have all experienced occasions when we got what our hearts desired, when something that we didn't want vanished miraculously from our lives. Life is made up of joy and sorrow and we must taste both if we are to live a full life.

The Konkani words '*sukh*' (joy) and '*dukh*' (sorrow) are derived from the

primit language. The syllable 'kha' in Sanskrit refers to the senses. Hence, what the senses consider pleasant is 'sukh', and what they consider unpleasant is 'duhkha'. Our senses are the touchstones that determine whether we should be sad or happy. The question that arises here is whether Man should allow his life to take shape according to the dictates of his senses. If Man is no longer a primitive being, if he takes pride in having developed to a cultured, educated being, should his senses be allowed to wield so much power?

Our senses tell us what is pleasant and what is unpleasant, and accordingly, we slot our experiences into these two groups. The time has come for us to liberate ourselves from the tyranny of the senses, to ensure that they remain our servants, not our masters. When the senses take control of our lives, we lose our sense of balance, we are overjoyed when something pleasant occurs and devastated by what is unpleasant. A monkey claps delightedly when happy and screeches loudly when upset – our senses reduce us to this monkey state.

Man evolved from the ape, and like that animal, has been blessed with a sense of hearing, of sight, touch and taste. The process of evolution, however, has carried him forward, and God has blessed him with another important attribute, an intellect that helps him think and decide. This intellect should enjoy pride of place in Man's faculties. The senses should determine whether a feeling is pleasant or unpleasant, but once that is done, the intellect should decide whether Man should laugh or weep.

Let us look at an example -- The senses dictate that *jalebis* are sweet on the tongue. Whether a man should eat those *jalebis*, if so, how many he should consume, are facts that should be decided by the intellect. The senses should have no further power.

When Chanakya's companions deserted him at a critical moment in his life, he said, 'Let them go. As long as my intellect stays by me, I want no one else.' If we live our lives by this dictate, we shall remain balanced in sorrowful times and in moments of joy, and we shall realise that it is beneath our dignity to give in to the dictates of our senses which create havoc in our intellect.

Sorrow, however, is necessary, for it makes us look deep into our lives and keeps us emotionally 'alive'. It destroys our base emotions and strengthens our hearts. It is like a tonic that rejuvenates our souls and it is indeed an unfortunate man who claims that he knows no sorrow.

Great personalities like Rama, and Krishna, Socrates, Jesus and Gandhi have faced disappointment and sorrow, too, and the measure of their greatness lies in the manner in which they have faced these troubles. Sorrow strengthens a man's heart and fills it with nectar, so, if we try to avoid sorrow, we lose out on this experience. We must not lose sight of our moorings no matter how terrified we are by the calamity that looms before us. We might call out to the Gods for help, but we must never turn away from our sorrows or

wish them away. We should face up to our problems, only then shall we realise that they do not stand before us with empty hands; they bring us them a treasure house of strength and good qualities that we can draw upon.

I have been terrified whenever a calamity has struck my life, but I have faced these problems squarely and learnt the lessons that the problem has taught. 'I must have been weak and inadequate, that's why these sorrows have come to make me strong,' I say to myself. And then I turn to the gods to make me strong enough to face up to the challenge instead of wishing the sorrow away.

Sorrows make a man strong and courageous. Once Man realises this fact, he will face up to any calamity and draw valuable strength from it. He will guard this new strength zealously and ensure that no one comes to know about what he has gained. A strong man doesn't make a spectacle of himself as he faces up to his problems. He realises that sorrow is but a tonic that rejuvenates and strengthens him, it is not the food that nourishes his soul.

There are some people, however, who regard sorrow as fodder for the growth of their souls. They believe that happiness is a pleasant feeling that often lulls Man into a sense of complacency, but sorrow keeps his inner consciousness awake. Hence they follow a path of penance or '*tapascharya*' that brings considerable physical and mental discomfort as they pursue their goal of inner growth.

It is true that penance makes Man resolute and capable of undertaking immense projects, overcoming all the hurdles that stand in his way. No great work can be done without penance, but it is not necessary to subject one's body to intense agony, or to experience immense sorrow, or deny all forms of happiness as part of this quest. It is not true that all joys are detrimental and all sorrows are conducive to one's growth. Moments of happiness renew one's zest for life, they keep us content and strengthen our mind, so it is not right to reject them merely because they are pleasant. At the same time there are some sorrows that make us sullen and mournful and remove all traces of laughter and good cheer. We withdraw from contact with others and our minds become weak. Such sorrows must be shunned. A man of penance, therefore, must embrace the joys that have a positive effect on his soul and shun the sorrows that create a negative one.

There is a place for sorrow and for joy in our lives, and it is important that we experience both these emotions. It is our intellect, however, that must decide what should be embraced and to what degree, and what should be discarded.

If Man is resolute that he will not be dwarfed by his emotions, excess joy will not sweep him away, nor will sorrow make him lose his moorings. What, then, is the basis on which Man should chalk out his life? That

Upanishads provides us with an answer –

There is a beautiful story in the *Kathopanishad* where Nachiketa presses Yama,

‘Some people say that Man ceases to exist after death, some people say that he remains alive. What is the truth?’ he asks.

Yama tries to brush him away. ‘Don’t ask this question, you won’t understand the answer, even the gods didn’t comprehend it. Ask me something else,’ he says. But Nachiketa is adamant, so Yama explains:

Man is often asked to choose between two goals in life. He can live a life dedicated to the welfare of humanity, leading to glory. Or he can lead a life of pleasure and personal satisfaction. The wise man chooses the former goal while the foolish man chooses the latter. These are the two paths of life which lead Man in opposite directions. One leads to knowledge while the other carries him to a realm of ignorance.

The foolish man is only concerned with his well being and prosperity in the present moment. ‘I have just one life to lead,’ he reasons, ‘and the total span of time between my birth and death may be fifty or seventy years, or at most a hundred years. I must spend this time in eating and drinking and making merry so that I can experience all the pleasures of life before I die.’ He rushes this way and that in his blind quest for pleasure without realising that there is another life after the earthly one comes to an end. The wise man is aware of this fact and chooses the path that leads to glory.

All men who are born on earth will die one day. Some men, however, continue to live on by virtue of their actions, and by the memories they leave behind. There is another class of men who live on as forces of inspiration.

We do not know who painted the frescos at the Ajanta caves or who sculpted the images at Ellora. These men passed away centuries ago but their creations survive as legacies. The achievements of great emperors like Ashok and Akbar survive in our collective memories. Vyasa and Valmiki, Rishidas, Kabir and Dnyaneshwar live on by virtue of their actions in the collective memory of our people. Their writings are still read and revered. Buddha, Jesus and Gandhi survive by virtue of their actions and the memories they have left behind. They also survive in the hearts of countless people because of the inspiration they provide. Man survives even after his earthly life comes to an end, and this ‘life after death’ is as real and lengthy as the one that went before. The *Upanishads* term this state as *amaparaaya*.

How did these individuals manage to survive after their earthly death? When these individuals were alive on earth they did not lose themselves in worldly pleasures. They were concerned with the good of humanity, of society and of the country. Human life should not be confined to the amassing of

wealth and property and the seeking of pleasure and experience. The earthly life is but a fraction of Man's existence and it continues even after his earthly body is destroyed. The Upanishads state that Man should be aware of this fact so that he can fix a goal and work towards that goal, giving his earthly life a meaning and making it relevant to the society in which he lives. A life without any motivation, one that is steeped in worldly pleasures is not worth living, the *Upanishads* declare.

Man cannot chart the course of his life properly until he becomes aware of the 'samsara' or 'existence after death'. Only then will he choose the path that leads to the common good of the people, even though this path may provide experiences that are not very pleasant. When Man draws up his philosophy of life and charts his goals, he must choose, not between joy and sorrow, but between the paths that lead to mere earthly pleasure or to eternal glory, the *Kathopanishad* says.

Everyone is fond of pleasure, but Man must develop a taste for the varied experiences he will face as he travels on the path to glory. There will be joys and sorrows and only his intellect can help him decide what he must embrace.

It is a fallacy to believe that one's life can only be steeped in sorrow. Those who have faced many sorrowful episodes, and prayed for death to put an end to their suffering, hope for a faint glimmer of joy and seize any chance to experience it. Man's life is built around this quest for joy. Even those who undertake penance do so to liberate themselves from this state of sorrow. There is no point in complaining that this world is full of sorrow for in that case Man's entire effort in life will be directed towards the removal of these afflictions.

Buddha says that old age, illness and death are natural phenomena that are inevitable. Most of the other woes in Man's life arise out of his boundless desire as he seeks to acquire material gains. These woes can be removed if Man follows the 'eightfold path' that advocates 'balance' in all spheres of life. Man must not go to any extreme, he must follow the middle path in all his actions and experiences. The strings of a sitar should not be wound too tight, nor should they be too lax if we aim to bring out good music. Man, too, should avoid a life full of excesses. If one lives a balanced life, guided by one's intellect, one's life will hum, like a finely tuned sitar. Buddha said this two thousand five hundred years ago. It is relevant even today.

WHEN IT IS TIME ...

His childhood was spent in extreme poverty. By the time he reached adolescence, he decided that, come what may, he would not die a poor man. Fate and Destiny are empty words, he said to himself, if one has the ability to strive for one's goals, the humblest of persons can rise to unprecedented heights. A voice, deep within his heart, commanded him to 'move forward!' Spurred by this voice he surged from one daring enterprise to another, till, in a few years time, he became a millionaire.

He had started earning money by the time he was fifteen, and continued in this manner for the next thirty five years. He wielded great power because of his wealth and people sprang to their feet and bowed before him, hanging on to his words. Suddenly one day, a simple event set him thinking that all this wealth and power was no longer as attractive as it used to seem; he felt that he had lost something on the way.

The man was fifty years old. He was driving to Panaji, and as usual, he stopped at Mardol to buy a braid of jasmine. He'd always leave the packet of flowers on the seat and the driver would take it into the house. That day, however, he unwrapped the packet and held the flowers up to his

nose. It was late in the evening, and the jasmine was in full bloom. As the heady fragrance entered his senses the man was overcome with remorse - something was missing in his life. There was no meaning to his hollow existence, the essence seemed to have withered and died.

As the car drove past the Kundai ghat, he gazed at the scene about him. He had passed this way hundreds of times, but Nature's beauty had never drawn his attention. Today, all of a sudden, a curtain seemed to sweep aside and the scene around him seemed ethereal in the faint light.

A thought began to whirl about in his brain. 'I've earned so much, my wealth fills my coffers and flows out of the doors! I lack nothing ... yet, all these years, the heady fragrance of jasmine has never filled my senses; my eyes have not gazed on Nature's beauty; my ears have not listened to the songs of birds. In all these years, I have not had a good night's sleep or eaten a meal in peace; No time for my wife and children. When was the last time I laughed out loud? I have had no time for any of this. Wake up early in the morning and get to work. All day I'd work. I'd continue working till bedtime, even my dreams were about my work. My whole life has been tied up in work; it's been like a prison ... and what have I achieved? Have I enjoyed any pleasures?'

The man held the flowers up to his nose and inhaled deeply, as though to make up for all the years he had lost. By the time they crossed Banast, he was sick of the life he led. He remained upset for the next two days, barely able to eat or sleep or tend to his work. On the third day he came to a decision, just like he'd done thirty five years ago.

I will not be crushed to death by work. I must free myself from this nightmare that's cast about me. I've earned enough. I shall hand the family business to my children and step aside. I'm still strong, there are so many pleasures I can enjoy. I've wasted thirty five years of my life, can't waste any more. He was a stubborn man. Once he came to a decision, nothing could make him change.

He called his Manager and told him his plans. He'd bought a small bungalow in a coastal village some time ago. He got the house cleaned and furnished, and ensured that a radiogram and some records and books were taken to the house. He opened a new bank account with enough money to take care of his needs and had an advocate divide his estate amongst his sons.

People looked at him askance. He was still at an age when he could achieve new conquests, and here he was, giving everything away. But he only said 'I'm fifty, now, and stepping into my fifty first year. This is the *Vanaprasthashrama* or the third stage of life, as the sages decreed. Man should engage in activities and duties that suit his age. He should be adept at winding up his work and responsibilities as he has been a

alishing them during his early years.'

It was a month since he moved into his new house. He'd get up at daybreak to go for a walk. He'd watch the sun rise and listen to the birds sing. He'd water the plants in his garden and gaze at each plant with pride. He'd read a book or listen to some music, and sometimes he'd just play with his dog. He was a different person in just a month. He seemed to have forgotten his old life. He was happy.

Suddenly one night, at about nine, he heard a knock on the door. He'd just had dinner and was reclining on an arm chair with a book and a cigarette in his hand. Now, who can that be, he said to himself. He'd given strict instructions that no one should come to meet him. It was as though he'd wiped all connections with his past.

'Who's that?' he called, as he moved to the door.

'It's me ...' a strange voice replied,

'And who may that be?'

'Open the door. You'll recognise me ...'

The man opened the door, and who did he see ... It was Yama, the Lord of Death, standing before him, shaking with laughter!

'You...?'

'Yes. It's me.'

'And why are you here?'

'I've come to take you.'

'Me?... Where?'

'Where everyone has to go, some day.'

'What! So quickly? I don't want to go so soon. It's just a month since I came here. just a month since I started living ... And you want me to come with you?'

'What were you doing all this time, then?' Yama asked the man. ' weren't you alive? You were given fifty years to live.'

'Yes ... But, what sort of life was that? The first fifteen years passed by in extreme poverty and the remaining thirty five ...'

'In poverty, of another sort. Right?' Yama completed his words.

'Yes. I spent those in earning ...'

'Earning what?'

'Money! What else? I was born in a poor family. Had to suffer from neglect and neglect. Swore that I wouldn't die a poor man, so I began to earn money ...'

'What for? What was your aim?'

'I wanted money to lead a comfortable life.'

Yama began to laugh. 'That's where all of you stumble. You set out to earn happiness. You feel that's not possible without wealth, and then you get so busy earning money that you forget that you wanted happiness ...'

'Yes. That's right. The process of earning wealth is intoxicating and pleasant in its own way. But then the original aim, that of earning happiness, gets pushed to one side and earning money becomes one's sole aim in life.'

'So, instead of you being the master of your wealth, it is your money that begins to control you.'

'Yes. But I gave up this pursuit of money when I realised this truth and started looking for happiness again ...'

'I'm sorry. You were given fifty years of life. What can I do if I have wasted all that time? Your span of life has come to an end. And when death happens, you must leave. Come. Let's go.'

The man began to tremble at Yama's words. He staggered back to his chair as Yama followed him into the house and sat on the sofa before him.

'So, are you ready?' he asked.

'I'm only fifty years old, this is a time when man is energetic and can achieve so much. I'm strong. Do I look old? Men, who are thirty years older than me are still around. Men, as old as my father, on the brink of Death, yet they want to be the Prime Minister! Why do you leave them alone, why come to me? Anyway, I'm not going with you.'

'You know that's not possible,' Yama reasoned, 'Death doesn't come according to your will. It comes when it must, without any invitation, even though you may protest. When your span of life has run out, Death comes ...'

'My life has run out ...? Rubbish! Look at my age ... do you think I'm old?'

Yama began to laugh. 'Who told you that Death comes only when one is old? There is no connection between age and death, no rule that says, old people shall die. Death comes at any age, in childhood, in youth ... haven't you seen little children die?'

'Of course I have, but that's not right. Those with wrinkled skin and sagging flesh and staggering gait call out to you, but you ignore them. Instead, you carry away those little ones, who have seen nothing of life who have experienced none of life's joys. Are you being fair? Take the old crones. No one will complain. No one will curse you. But when you take those young ones you appear cruel and heartless ...'

'Are you the one who decides when someone should go, or is that my privilege?' Yama bristled.

'Your'sof course ...'

'Listen then,' Yama began, 'I take people away for many reasons, you w

understand all of them, but remember this. No one is taken away without cause. When I take old people away, it is because they have lived long enough. A full stop brings a sentence to a close, when the curtains fall the play comes to an end, and one who is tired needs sleep and rest. Life, too, must cease at some point, this is a basic rule.

'Now let's take an example from your area of experience. When you tell your Manager on a business trip you'd tell him to go to a certain place, do a certain piece of work, and return on a specified date. You'd give him a certain amount of money for his expenses, right? It's the same with Life. Man is born with a certain responsibility — to improve the circumstances and the environment he is born into. He is sanctioned a certain span of time in which he must achieve this end. Once this end is achieved, he is of no further use. So I take him away. I'm not concerned with who the man is, or how old or good or great he might be. Some people are distracted, and forget the responsibility that they have been entrusted with in this life. This man is useless, he has wasted his life, I pity him, and I take him away.

'If some people are allowed to live too long, they are apt to create trouble for themselves and for the ones they live with. I take such people away so that their families are saved undue stress. Sometimes I feel that a man's cause will benefit greatly if he is not around. I inspire him to give up his life and whisk him away. I do nothing without reason, it's just that I can't always explain these reasons, and anyway, you wouldn't understand.

'I'm as concerned about the environment around you, as I am about you. Men will come and go, but Life in this universe will continue to sprout forth in many different forms. New forms of life have appeared on earth, many such forms are still hidden in Nature's womb, and the process of creation that brings them forth continues without pause. Every creature that is born on earth, whether it is man or merely a tiny worm or insect, has a role to play in this creative process. If you look at it from this point of view, you will see that your death is as important as the life you spend on earth. Suppose there's a patient in your house, one who is ill and bedridden with no chance of recovery. He cannot live a meaningful life, nor does he die. Tell me, isn't this inconvenient? You might not admit it, but if I were to take him away, he would be happy, and so would you. It is the job of Death to remove hindrances and obstacles from the path of the living. Now, do you understand?'

'Yes ...'

Yama continued in the same vein. 'Man should live his life fully aware of all these factors, but you don't do that. You pass your life as though death will never appear before you. Or, at least, not so soon. And when, one day, death knocks at your door, you are shattered. How did this happen so suddenly? Why is death stalking me, you ask. This is not the right way to

live. Each man should be convinced that death can come to him at any time. He can die today. At this very minute. Only then will he know what it is to be really 'alive' and only then will he lead a full and meaningful life.

'A poem can be of any length. It can consist of many lines, or be compressed into a single one. What is important is the thought that begins to reverberate when the poem ends. A man's life, too, can be long or short. What is important is how meaningful those years have been. The effect of a deep and meaningful life is felt only after the person passes away ... Do you understand me?'

'I understand ... but ...'

'But what? Ask.'

'So man cannot control Death. He cannot decide when he should die, right?'

'Yes,' Yama said.

'Then, what is it that Man can control?'

'He can control the quality of his life, decide what sort of a life he lives. The time of death is fixed and cannot be postponed, or brought forward,' Yama declared.

'But this is being fatalistic ...'

'Of course it is', Yama agreed. 'However, this sort of fatalism doesn't cripple you, it makes you bold and strong. Man realises that if he is to die he will do so even in the protected confines of his home. So, he is willing to face any dangers and surmount all obstacles, and this is what I mean by being 'alive'. Those who are scared of taking risks, who weigh every option carefully before taking a small step are weak, and a society composed of weak people doesn't achieve very much. A strong society is one in which Men are unafraid and prefer to face Death rather than lead a wretched existence. Do you understand?'

'Man should accept that Death can come at any moment and that the moment of death is predestined. Since no one can harm him before that he will be willing to take on all odds and live a fruitful life. Such fatalism is good for man and for society ...'

Yama had an answer for all his questions, so what was the point in arguing with him, the man thought. So he simply said that he knew, all men who are born on earth will die some day, but he didn't know that Death could come at any moment. 'I didn't think very deeply about Death. I knew I'd die some day but not so soon, so I kept postponing things. Lived a loose, disorganised life which had little meaning. Tell me one thing, what happens after a man dies, where does he go?'

'Do you think I'm going to say "Heaven" or "Hell"? ' Yama smiled. 'Those are concepts created by your priests and learned men. Such places exist only in their brains. Man dies, and that's the end of him. His body is

less now, so it is consigned to the flames or buried in the earth. His life, too, is stilled, so all the thoughts and worries, joys and sorrows, everything comes to an end.'

Does that mean that when Man dies, he leaves nothing behind?'

Now, that's a different story,' Yama countered, 'when Man dies he leaves his acts – both good and bad.'

Yama's gaze darted about the room and came to rest on a stove in one corner. 'What's that stove here for? When it's cold you light a fire in it, and the warmth spreads through the room, right? Let's take this as an example. Man's life is like a stove and his actions are like the warmth that comes from it. When the fire in the stove dies down, the warmth escapes into the air in the room. Similarly, when a man dies the effect of his actions escapes into the world about him. What you call tradition and culture is the effect of the actions of many, many men who lived in previous generations. Some men's actions bear fruit for ten or fifteen years after they pass away. Others are effective for a couple of hundred years. Buddha's actions have been effective for the last two thousand five hundred years, and they still continue to be so. This is the legacy a Man leaves behind. The more meaningful his life on earth has been, the greater his legacy. Those who are not enlightened do not understand this.'

It was as though a flash of lightning cut through the darkness and threw everything around him into stark relief. 'I'm one of them, one of the unenlightened ones ...,' the man said in a pitiful tone. 'I, too, believed that "being alive" meant to eat and drink and make merry. That's why I came to live here. Now that I've heard you talk about leaving a legacy ..., beg you, give me some more years, just ten years ...so I can leave something behind, too.'

The man fell at Yama's feet, but Yama was powerless. 'Ten years! I can't give ten hours, no one can. When the time comes, no one can do anything. Come on, we must go, now.'

'I beg you, don't take me now ...five years, that's all ...' the man lowered his voice, 'you can have half my estate in exchange.'

Yama was outraged. 'Who do you think I am? Some minister in your government? We don't have such corruption in my kingdom, everything moves according to the rules. Nothing happens out of line ... understand? Now, come on!'

The man fell to the ground in despair, 'Not five years, then, give me just one!'

'Not one year, not one day, not even an hour. Come on. We're getting late,' Yama thundered.

The man realised that Yama would not budge, that there was no point in pleading any more. He decided to turn himself in and said in a calm

tone, 'All right, then. Just give me five minutes, there's a little job that must do.'

'What's that?'

'Let me write a Will. Might be useful for those I leave behind.'

'All right. Take ten minutes,' Yama said.

The man picked up a pen and paper and began to write.

'I must leave all of a sudden, so I thought I'd write a few words. Man can only live his life once, so he must live in such a way that he is not filled with regret when it is time for him to die.

'Man must earn money because nothing in life is possible without it, but he must remember that money is the 'means' not the 'end'. So, what is the 'end' or the target that he must aim at? Why, it is to lead a meaningful life, one that is fruitful for himself and for society at large.

'When Man leaves this world' he should feel that society is a better place than it was when he was born. He should be convinced that he has helped make it a better place, and so he should depart happily.

'Money is important, but there is a limit to its power. One can buy most things in life, but good health and happiness, love and knowledge cannot be purchased. The power of money does not frighten a brave man, nor does it make a coward brave.

'One cannot say when Death will come, it can strike at any moment, so one should lead one's life with this in mind. One should not procrastinate or waste time in doubt and suspicion. One should spend every moment usefully, treat everyone with affection and lead a fruitful life. This is the best way to lead a meaningful life'.

The ten minutes he had been allotted came to an end. He put the sheet of paper in an envelope and placed it on the table. He was calm and at peace when he turned to Yama, 'Come, let's go ...' he said.



The well known Konkani essayist Ravindra Kelekar is Fellow, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi. He was awarded the Bhasha Bharathi Samman of the Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore. The Government of India recently conferred on him one of India's highest civilian awards, the Padmabhushan, in recognition of his contribution to literature.

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